

STRANGE ADVENTURES ON OTHER WORLDS—

PLANET stories

JULY

25¢



Here, on the Pioneer Worlds, Earthmen were despised. And Thorpe rated low even for an Earthman . . .

THE MAN the WORLDS REJECTED

novelet by Dickson Gordon

GAMA IS THEE!

by Stanley Mullen

Incorruptible, the Assassin. The best you could do was to buy the delicate Kri-Kri death.

ETHIC of the ASSASSIN

*by Hoyden
Howard*

PLANET STORIES



VOL. 6, No. 1

A FICTION HOUSE MAGAZINE

JULY, 1953

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Join the clamor of brickbatolley.

E. T. SCOTT, President

JACK O'SULLIVAN, Editor

MALCOLM REISS, Mgr. Editor

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THE VIZIGRAPH

Winging across the Atlantic well ahead of schedule comes the letter we requested in these columns in the last issue. Beleguared Bryan Berry, our 3-in-1 British author, pens a full-bodied missive that stoutly elucidates on the galaxy of charges hurled again him. We are grateful to Mr. Berry for being so prompt, and for taking the time to ferret out and reply to those letter writers who violently disagreed with his technique, characters, style, plot, etc. But let Bryan Berry speak his own piece.

And here are the pic winners: (1) Philip Brantingham; (2) Radell Nelson; (3) Lyle Kessler.

AIM AT A STAR

146 Kingsway
Petts Wood
Kent, England

Dear Mr. O'Sullivan,

Many thanks for your letter of January 28th., and for the enclosed proofs of VIZIGRAPH containing all those comments. I shouldn't think it happens very often that a British author's first three STF tales to be submitted to the States get accepted, published all in one issue, and also cause such a variety of comment. Thus, despite the virulence of some of those comments, I'm very pleased; under the circumstances who wouldn't be? Indifference (which was to have been expected: unknown author, very short tales, etc.) would have really hurt much more than even Mr. Brantingham's bombardment. Since said Mr. Brantingham wrote the longest letter and asks me to criticize it, here goes:

Taking his last point first: Bryan Berry is not a pseudonym. It's what I was born with, for better or worse (all right, Mr. Brantingham, for worse if you like). Now as for his criticisms regarding the leanings towards the poetic in pulp stories, I think he is downright wrong to call it a defect just because there are only a few writers, in any field, who can make a real success of it. That's like saying that there are very few really good men in the world and therefore it's a defect if people of lesser stature attempt to emulate them. And the remarks about emotion, too, seem wrong to me, since the implication is that for a pulp writer to use emotion in his stories is bad since only the lordly few can do it properly, and the petty scribblers should leave such things respectfully alone. The hell they should! Aim at a star and you might hit a haystack, Mr. Brantingham, but aim at the haystack and you'll probably stay all your life on the ground.

When I read the accusation that the FINAL VENUSIAN was a steal I thought I'd really got my prosecution into a corner since to my certain knowledge I had read no Bradbury story called DWELLERS IN SILENCE. Further investigations, however, proved me wrong. I had read the story, but under another title. The fact remains, however, that Mr. Brantingham is obviously convinced the story was a steal, and nothing I say now will make any difference to his views. However, for those who have followed this business and



who haven't accused me quite so categorically let me explain how the FINAL VENUSIAN came about.

I submitted the story under the title TWO'S COMPANY—from the saying "Two's company and there's a crowd," and the first draft of the tale was simply a fictional representation of the truth behind the saying. It contained no robots; there were simply two castaways on a planet living harmoniously together. Along comes someone else—by spaceship—and then the tale progressed along similar lines to the version you read, with the possessive instincts and jealousies of the two original castaways wrecking the lives of all three. I changed this version in the rewrite because I thought it had too little science-fiction content to sell to a science-fiction magazine. For this reason I added the robots, time travel, etc. and thus switched bits of the plot around accordingly.

No, Mr. B., I have not got a "fixation" upon the romantic. You are wrong there. I am simply a romantic-minded individual who is anything but ashamed of it and who is happiest when writing stories with a romantic (not necessarily love) flavor. Straight tales I find difficult to write while tales that are romantic in theme but not melancholy—emotionally "happy" tales, that is—appear to need more writing ability than I have yet developed. I hope and pray, though, that the "yet" is the key word in that last sentence.

To Dave Hammond I would say that other STF magazines hadn't heard of me for the simple reason that I hadn't submitted anything to them. The three tales you read were the first three STF stories I sent across the Atlantic and were only the fifth, sixth and seventh STF tales I had ever written. And do you really think it fair to condemn a writer as being bad after reading only three of his tales—and shorts at that?

Thanks, Mr. Nelson, for the comments. So far as the philosophy question goes I certainly believe that Man has already lost more than he has gained in recent years, that his new technological advancements have already become too big for him to handle and that until he regains a good deal of what he has lost there can be little peace for him.

Now, since you specifically ask for biographical details, Mr. O'Sullivan, here are some: Aged 23 (plus a few odd days), single, worked in a publisher's office, written advertisement copy, worked as staff writer in an editorial agency, made models for a military museum, painted surrealist pictures, worked as comic strip artist, sub-edited international literary monthly, collaborated with editor of NATURE (British) on educational film strip scripts, stoked boilers, written poetry. I sold my first story at 16, gave up all regular employment last year to free-lance and have written some 300,000 words on STF and allied themes since last April, of which about 200,000 have already been published (over here). Have been reading STF since I was eleven or thereabouts, think Simak the best STF author, like Bradbury (did you guess?) Van Vogt, Sturgeon, Russell, del Rey, and a rising young star on this side of whom you may or may not have heard—E. C. Tubbs. Finally, so far as the comments on my tales go, I



have an unfortunate feeling that Carol McKinney hit the nail on the head when she said that if the tales had appeared under different names (—or in different issues?—) there would have been no fuss. In the film CITIZEN KANE Welles spoke the line: "If the headline is big enough it makes the news big enough." I just hate myself for thinking this but I suppose that could apply here.

Thank you, Mr. O'Sullivan, for this opportunity of answering back. Thank you, too, for your good wishes.

BRYAN BERRY

TENN—TEN-SHUN

1008 Viers Mill Road
Rockville, Maryland

Dead Editor:

Subject is RICARDO'S VIRUS. Really feel Mr. Tenn could have done better. In fact, find it hard to believe this is same Tenn who wrote HOUSE DUTIFUL, BETELGEUSE BRIDGE, VENUS IS A MAN'S WORLD, and FIREWATER. In fact, *don't* believe it! Maybe Tenn is trying to "write down" to us characters who like two-gun action space opera such as we usually look for in PS. If so, fear he overshot the field. Get a load of this, from p. 48:

"He'd hate to leave life. It meant leaving the thrill of tracking your quarry on the bracing slope of Mount Caniline where the dodle breeds in the Season of Wind-Driven Rains (The dodle? Urk!);

(Continued on page 110)

TASK OF KAYIN

By WILLIAM MORRISON

From out beyond the second sun he came, a fugitive from a dead and sterile world . . . seeking solace, friends, a home, on Earth—a planet of even greater terrors.

THE sensation of which he was most conscious was that of loneliness. He was no longer very much afraid, and sometimes he even thought that his enemies back home were no longer hunting for him. But in the midst of these strange creatures he learned that there was one thing worse than open hostility, and that was indifference. They had no more interest in him than they had in each other, and even though their indifference increased his own chances for safety, it was a chilling thing none the less.

He knew that though they were like him superficially, they were intensely different within. He stood at a street corner trying to fathom the difference, while the crowds surged about him, buffeting him from side to side. They seemed to have no idea of personal dignity. He still understood their language only imperfectly, and spoke it with difficulty, but he had learned, in a primitive way, to read their faces, and during this time of day, at least, their faces told of a strain and fear all their own, of an uncertainty even greater than his. They were going home from work, and they were afraid of countless trifles—that something unpleasant might happen, that they might not get seats on their conveyances, that bad news might greet them when they arrived.

He stared with fascination at a heap of newspapers spread out on the corner stand. He could guess the purpose of these layers of white sheets covered with black or red symbols, but he could not yet interpret them, and he had no idea whether any one had seen or reported his ship. It was almost certain that some one had observed a shooting star, but the chances were very much against any observation having been made of the star's slow, dark drift to earth. At any rate, he had concealed his ship among the growth

of tall native plants, and some day he would find time to repair the relatively minor damage he had sustained, and continue his journey.

Meanwhile, he had to make up his mind what to do here. His original store of food had been exhausted a week before as these creatures counted time, and despite the fact that his metabolic requirements were low, he had long needed to eat again. The food that was exhibited in many stores was of a kind strange to him, but from the very structure and behavior of individuals who ate it, he knew that it was of the right chemical composition. Examining it cautiously with a small analyzer held close to his eye, he noted that at least it contained none of the more dangerous poisons. It would do, if he could obtain it.

But he must obtain it in a manner that these creatures considered legal, not as he had obtained his clothes. He recalled how absurdly different his own clothes had been, constructed to fit a creature whose morphology was so much unlike theirs. He had taken over a suit from a man he had met driving on a dark country road, not too close to the ship. He had stopped the car and put the man to sleep without difficulty, but there must have been a great outcry after his victim had awakened to find himself cold and naked in the driver's seat.

He hadn't minded, for he had already left the place where the incident had occurred. But he wanted no hue and cry raised here. Although under other conditions he would have minded their hostility no more than their indifference, he knew that hostility now might very seriously limit his freedom to act.

He listed the things he had to do. He had to find food and shelter, learn their language



and customs, and as quickly as possible, their alphabet. He had to acquire their manner of thought and feeling so well that he could blend with them not only superficially, but psychologically as well. He had to—

A ROUGH shoulder caught him on the chest and spun him half around. A rough voice, more a snarl than anything else, said, "Whatsa matter, ya blind?"

The way the words were run together confused him, but he had listened keenly, and he knew the phrase that was required in such situations. He said politely, but almost unintelligently, "Excuse. I sorry."

"Foreigner, huh? Why don't ya go back where ya came from?"

This was the first person who had spoken to him in his new world. The encounter left him angry and contemptuous, but it was not to be long before he learned that the individual he had been privileged to meet was not wholly typical.

He moved along, alert to observe and to learn, but entirely without aim so far as an ultimate destination was concerned. He noted that the nature of the streets he traversed changed subtly with every intersection. The primitive, but well constructed buildings that had lined them soon gave way to even more primitive, dilapidated, and filthy structures. It was clear that they had rich and poor here, and that he was approaching the dwellings of the poor.

He heard a rhythmic sound in the street, as of a percussion instrument, and following it, found a female of the prevailing species, dressed somewhat differently from the other females, and pounding on a hollow cylinder of fairly large diameter. Other, more piercing instruments, added sounds of their own, and then voices were lifted in song. He lingered, fascinated, and wished only that he had a sound-recorder to take permanent note of the strange music.

He was not the only one who lingered. Half a dozen dilapidated males had gathered, attracted like him by the rhythmic noise, and after a female had ended a strange exhortation which he did not fully understand, they all followed the company of musicians into a ramshackle building. Inside, he listened to other exhortations, and then had food thrust upon him.

It was a bowl of soup, the first nutrient of this strange planet that he had eaten. The taste, as well as the quick ocular analysis he made, indicated that it was deficient in many of the chemicals that he needed for his own nutrition, but at least it had energy value, and he imbibed it slowly and thoughtfully. When he had finished, they asked him if he wanted more, but he said politely, "No, thank."

The young woman who had offered it to him said, "Oh, you're a refugee, I suppose. Driven out of your native country?"

He nodded.

"Don't you have any friends here?"

He shook his head, and said, "No, thank."

"That's too bad. You look as if you hadn't eaten for a long time. Your face is awfully thin."

"Yes, thin." He did not explain that for a member of his race he was not thin at all.

"What's your name, please?"

"Name? What?"

"How do people call you?"

"Kayin. My name Kayin."

"Kane. That's rather a strange name for a foreigner. Well, don't worry, Mr. Kane, we'll take care of you."

Her attitude helped erase the hostile encounter of an hour before. When they finally showed him a cot, one of a row on which many men were already stretched out, he tried to reconcile the contradictory kinds of behavior he had met, and decided that the psychology of this race would prove more complicated than he had at first believed.

The cot was extremely inconvenient, but somehow he managed to stretch out on it like the others. He slept little, and in the morning, when he awoke, it was with strained muscles and a sense of fatigue, but he was eager to see more of the world on which he found himself, and he left the next day, to continue his wanderings. During the hours that followed, he covered many miles of ground. With ears and mind open, he picked up more and more words, and by evening he was fairly confident in his ability to make himself understood in almost any situation.

He went hungry that day, but in the evening he slept much more comfortably at the foot of an old tree on a vacant lot. Far above

he could see the star from which he had come. He stared at it impersonally for a short time, wondering whether he would see his own planet again. Then he fell into a half-sleep, one that rested him, though still leaving his senses partly alert.

He was becoming more accustomed to the rather short day-and-night rhythm of the planet, and he awoke at the first faint signs of daylight before anyone had noticed him.

That day he encountered groups of men congregated about dingy little buildings on a dingy street. He found that they were seeking employment, and knowing that the best way to learn about a strange race was to study the manner in which the people worked, he joined one of the groups. But there was not a single occupation with regard to which he could claim experience, and he was hired finally to do heavy, but unskilled labor, at eighty cents an hour.

The work was more difficult for him than for the others. He looked like them, but they had muscles which he simply did not possess. He was so clumsy at lifting rocks that another man, with whom he was working, said finally in exasperation, "Didn't you ever lift anything before? Look, pal, do it like this. Bend at the knees, see? That's it, like this—no, you're doing it all wrong!"

IT WAS a nuisance, it might even be dangerous, to be stared at so closely. The fact was that his knees simply would not bend as human knees did. They were jointed in quite another fashion, and no surface similarities could conceal the fact that in action there was all the difference of two worlds between them.

He said, "Sorry. I—injured."

"Oh, can't bend them, huh? This is no job for you, pal."

"Am stranger. Know not—what else."

"Yeah, it's tough."

He returned to his work again, this time warmed by the other's sympathy, and less uneasy about being observed. And as he worked, he thought sardonically of what they would think on his home planet if they knew.

He was sure that his enemies would have roared with laughter. Here was Kayin, the one they had feared for his brilliant mind, for his knowledge of science, for his prac-

tical skill. They had outwitted him—with the odds on their side, it was true—driven him a hunted creature past strange stars, and forced him to come to ground again in the guise of one of the meanest of a mean and unintelligent race. And even in the humble position to which he had been reduced, he could not hold up his end of the work.

He clenched his jaws grimly at the thought, and the very motion made him realize that in no way was he like the others, that even so simple a matter as the number and shape of his teeth might give him away. Unintelligent as they were, once they took the trouble to look with some care, they would know a creature who was not one of them.

On the second day of work he did arouse suspicion, but at first not from the other workers. The creature that bared its teeth and barked at him was a dog. For a time Kayin found the animal's attention embarrassing. He threw a stone at the beast, but it ran only a short distance, and stopped to bark again. He had an idea of what the trouble was. That day he had replaced his worn trousers by a new and baggy pair of overalls, not yet saturated with the scent of human beings, and the dog had noticed his own faint but strange odor. Now it was making a nuisance of itself, and drawing everyone's attention to him.

"That mutt don't like you, Mac," said a foreman who passed by.

"Funny about dogs, the way they bark at some people," someone laughed.

Kayin threw another stone, but the beast dodged and continued to bark. His audience was growing now, and Kayin's skin began to twitch nervously, in a way that itself might have drawn an audience if they had been in a mood to notice such details of behavior. "I patted eat this morning," he said apologetically. "Crazy dog smells cat."

He would have them all staring at him if this went on much longer, and he knew that he had to act quickly. Looking around him, he spied a compressed air hose lying on the ground. He picked it up, turned on the air, and directed the nozzle at the dog. The blast knocked the animal head over heels, and sent him howling on his way. Everyone laughed, and Kayin turned back to his work in relief. But from now on he

knew that he must wear no new clothes.

As the work progressed, his attention turned from the immediate tasks at hand, and he began to wonder what its purpose was. There seemed to be hundreds of men, all engaged in menial tasks, all part of some greater overall plan. He began to wonder, too, if people who could make such plans could be so unintelligent as he had first assumed. Or was it simply that their intelligence had not developed, that they lacked the background of science to make the most of their minds, to use the resources their planet possessed?

A rough voice, almost the twin of that first rough voice of two days before, growled, "Hey, you, wake up and get movin'. Whaddya think you're gettin' paid for?"

He swung his pick without looking up. The foreman had no idea that the tall foreigner he knew as Kane was staring at him curiously with tiny camouflaged eyes that quite literally grew in the back of the strangely shaped head, trying to understand what made the human being tick.

By the end of a week Kayin was confident that he knew the language well enough to start reading it. He went to a public school which he found was open in the evenings, and there joined a class where someone explained the alphabet, and made clear to foreigners that English was a language full of traps and pitfalls. Kayin absorbed the information eagerly, but after the third lesson he found the pace much too slow, and did not return. He had never before encountered a language of so strange a structure, and the actual making of the sounds gave him trouble, but the basic principles of language study were as valid here as on his home planet, and he learned rapidly. By the end of a month he could read.

By the end of the same month he had learned, too, the nature of the project on which he was working. On several occasions, the engineer in charge had passed by him to exchange a few words with the foreman and once with the man who had ordered the building.

The words had been significant. There could be no mistake, for Kayin had come across them in his reading. "Laboratory" had a very definite meaning. And there were

such expressions as "incubation tanks," and "thermostat controls." All in all, enough to let him know that they were engaged in constructing a plant for the manufacture of biochemical substances.

He knew that there were biochemical plants already in existence, scattered over the civilized part of the planet, and the thought of great danger did not occur to him. But he continued, as the men around him would have put it, to keep his ears open, and as time went on he became more and more disquieted.

MEANWHILE, his relations with the people among whom he worked became almost human. They greeted him every day as one of themselves, asked casual questions about the place from which he had come and the way he had lived, and accepted the answers as if with a quiet confidence that he was telling the truth. Once, in an access of good feeling, one of them had gone so far as to slap him amicably on the shoulder, and Kayin had experienced agony such as he had never felt before. But he managed to conceal the pain, and even to laugh weakly. He made sure, however, that a similar incident would never happen again. Whenever someone approached him too closely, he opened his extra eyes very slightly, ready to step aside at the touch of a too friendly hand.

He had not realized how much his own attitude toward them had changed until the day an accident occurred. A large shelf of rock had unexpectedly turned up to block the excavation of a wide pit, and it had been necessary to shatter it with dynamite. But the explosive did not at first go off, and one of the men had gone back to see what was wrong. He had been just in time to be knocked down by the blast itself, and to be covered by the mass of dirt and broken rock that slid into the excavation.

It was Kayin who ran for him first, digging frantically away at the smothering mass, without regard for the fragments that continued to rain down upon him. And after he had reached the man, who was unconscious, but still breathing, it was Kayin who had wondered why on this Earth he had taken the risk for the sake of a creature who meant so little to him. There was an-

other risk as well, he found, when they summoned a doctor to treat the injured man, and someone suggested that Kayin had been injured too. But Kayin quickly shrugged off the idea that he needed treatment, and went back at once to his work. He wanted no doctor discovering what unusual arms and legs and internal organs he had.

In the days that followed he continued to wonder at himself. Working together with these men, he had changed. But he must be careful, he knew, not to change too far. They had only, he was certain, to see him as he was, to realize his difference from them, and their friendliness would change to hate, causing them to turn from him with fear and loathing.

The building had reached the stage of scaffolding, and he was still at work. It was now that he learned the full truth about the project which was soon to come into operation.

He was on the outside of the building, and two of the men in charge were nearby. One of them, shrewd and elderly, had financed the building. The other, in his thirties, was the scientist who had invented the process. They were speaking in low tones, tones which no human being standing in Kayin's position would have been able to understand.

"You're sure, Blayson, that there's no danger?" the older man was saying.

The scientist smiled. "There's always some danger, Mr. Lymer, especially when you try something new. But there's nothing we shouldn't be able to control."

"I still don't think that you know too much about what you're doing."

"I've admitted that myself. But we get results, don't we? We'll corner the world market, Mr. Lymer. Name your antibiotic and we'll make it. And in addition to anything now being sold, we'll have dozens that nobody has even imagined. I think I've given you enough evidence to convince you of that."

"I suppose you have. But this use of cosmic rays makes me uneasy. You still don't know enough about them."

It was at this point that Kayin's third and fourth eyes, usually so completely concealed, popped wide open in surprise and

terror. It was fortunate that no one took the trouble to look at him at that moment.

The younger man was saying confidently, "We'll control them. All we need to know is that they're high energy, higher than anything we can produce here on earth, and that we can concentrate them in a way no one else can. There's nothing to fear, nothing that ordinary precautions shouldn't enable us to handle."

Nothing, Kayin thought, but the danger of depopulating most of a planet. His mind went back to what had happened on the second planet of his own sun, what had almost happened on the fourth planet. Within the space of a few hundred centuries of time, the second planet, with its population of four billion, had lost every inhabitant, and become a sterile monument of a dead civilization. Only the warning of what had already taken place had enabled the second planet to survive.

And in this place too, disaster would strike quickly. Kayin had begun to read more and more, and he knew what was taking place here. Science had developed quickly, but sporadically. Vast regions had remained untouched by it, masses of people knew nothing of it but the name and the fact that it could perform miracles. True, they had learned that certain discoveries might lead to disaster as well as to the improvement of their lives, but they still failed to test their discoveries fully before using them, they still failed to exercise the necessary controls.

The young man, Blayson, had made his discovery ahead of its proper time. At the rate at which human science was progressing, thought Kayin, at least a hundred years would have to pass before such a discovery could be considered safe. At the present stage, it simply could not be controlled. The concentrated cosmic rays would, as Blayson evidently anticipated, cause tremendous mutations in living organisms, in the molds and mycetes of different kinds, it would lead to the manufacture of useful antibiotics. But they would also lead to the production of entirely new forms of sub-microscopic life, forms not susceptible to ordinary methods of sterilization, forms that would multiply with inexorable speed. These forms produced from bits of human tissue would inevitably

be deadly to human beings and related species.

He himself, thought Kayin, possessed of a different body chemistry, might escape. But he would be the only intelligent creature to do so. And after the viruses had done their work, the planet, in its desolation and sterility, would resemble the second planet of his own star.

If he had learned of the imminence of disaster at the time he first arrived, he would hardly have been affected. He would have hated to see a race disappear. He had the scientist's desire to keep any race, even the least useful, alive so that he might study it, and at the very worst, write an article about it. But now—and this he realized almost to his amazement—he felt practically human himself. It must be the way he was living and working, the way the others treated him on the job. He did not want to see them annihilated.

HE WAS the only one to know the danger. He realized at once that he could tell no one. Blayson and Lymer had eyes only on the fortunes they intended to make, and they would have refused to believe anything that stood in the way of those fortunes. Nor could he go to anyone else. There would be questions—

He imagined himself trying to inform the Mayor of the city. Some underling would be sure to meet him. "You say there's danger, Mr. Kayin? That how you pronounce it? Foreign-sounding name. Where'd you come from?"

He would have to invent answers in advance for every possible embarrassing question. And then would come the most embarrassing of all:

"How do you know there's danger?"

There was no answer to that. Could he say that he had worked in the same field of research himself? Or could he give them the example of what had happened on another planet?"

It was a problem that he would have to solve by himself. He racked his head, and found no simple solution. He had his optical analyzer, and one or two additional trifles like it, but there was no special apparatus he could use, no weapons. Outside of his scientific knowledge and his non-human

brain, he had only the same weapons as the human beings themselves. And these were hardly enough to put an end for good to a project on which so many human beings had built their hopes.

The buildings approached completion, the laboratory equipment began to be installed. And then, finally, when delay was no longer possible, on the eve of the very day that was to see the plant put into operation, Kayin acted.

He knew that until work actually began there would be but a single night watchman, and it was this man at whom he struck first. A single carefully aimed blow with a padded club produced unconsciousness. Kayin did not strike hard, but he struck hard enough. As the watchman fell, Kayin seized the man, bound and gagged him.

Then he entered the building and began to destroy.

He started with the cosmic ray collector, working quietly and efficiently, and concentrating on the electronic and magnetic parts. These had been ordered long before the building itself had been begun. They would be hard to replace.

He passed on to the giant incubator vats, and finally turned his attention to the collection of formulas which reposed in the files. These were important, but he knew that they were not enough. The most important formulas of all lay in the mind of the man who had developed the process, and that was, for the moment at least, beyond him. What Kayin was doing now was playing for time.

He was setting a match to the papers of the last file when he heard a voice. More time had passed than he realized, and they had come early on this day that was to have seen the beginning of a great enterprise.

They must already have noted the absence of the watchman. Now he heard a gasp from Lymer, a groan that must have come from Blayson. Then there was cursing, slow, bitter and steady. Then footsteps, and Lymer was standing at the door of the office and shouting, "Here he is!"

Blayson was shouting to someone outside, and Kayin knew that in a moment the entire building would be swarming with people. He promptly tossed one of the files at Lymer, saw the man stumble and fall in an effort to avoid being hit, and was past the door

before the enraged man could scramble to his feet again.

Then he was in the great incubation room, with its monstrous vats, heading for the opposite end. But before he could reach it, a door swung open. A policeman appeared, and shouted, "Hey, you—stop!"

He dashed out through a side door into a small control room. He locked the door behind him. He heard a club pound furiously upon it, and the pounding ceased as the policeman decided against a further waste of time here. Kayin ran to the other door. As he did so the knob turned. He threw all his weight against the door and turned the key. Men pounded on both doors, and he looked around for windows. There were none. He was locked in.

He heard Blayson's voice, "Open up! You can't get away!"

There was, it was true, no way out. But Kayin said calmly, "Stay away, or I'll blow up the building."

AFTER the destruction he had already accomplished, they had no way of knowing that he was bluffing. The pounding stopped. Through the door he heard the whispered sounds of consultation. Then Blayson's voice again, "Come out. We won't hurt you."

"I realize that."

"You realize—"

"You think that I am afraid, do you not?"

There was surprise in the tones of Blayson's reply. "You don't sound crazy, but—"

"But what other reason could I have had for destroying so much valuable equipment?"

He heard Lymer say, "Over a hundred thousand dollars' worth. That cosmic ray collector cost at least that."

A policeman's voice: "You saw him, Mr. Lymer. Recognize him?"

"No, never saw him before in my life."

Blayson shouted again, this time with unconcealed anger, "Come on out."

"With pleasure. But first I should like to talk to you."

"You'll talk later."

"No." He knew that later they would not listen to him, and he realized that if he could convince Blayson of the danger of the project, his battle would be won. "Do

you want to know why I did so much damage, Mr. Blayson?"

"You've already answered that."

"No, I am not insane. It is you who are failing to use your mind properly. Your method is extremely dangerous."

"How do you know?"

"I have made similar studies."

"That's absurd. No one on earth has done anything like this."

"I didn't mention Earth," thought Kayin. Aloud, he said patiently, "You are mistaken. Your experiments are not new, and it is known—" he did not say where it was known—"it is known that they can lead to disaster. They can produce microorganisms of a virulence never before seen here."

"You're just imagining things!"

"I do not imagine. At this period, your discovery is of too treacherous a nature to be used."

Blayson was silent, and Kayin hoped that he was thinking of something else than breaking down the door.

"You will not be the first, Mr. Blayson, to have surprised a discovery of so great significance."

"I don't believe you. Open the door."

"In a moment. But think of what I have said."

"Open the door."

"Half a moment now. You do not care to listen further?"

A policeman growled, "He's stalling. We'll break it open."

"No need for that," said Kayin. "I shall come out. Perhaps if I speak to you face to face you will believe me."

He removed the jacket and shirt and tie to which he had become so accustomed these past few months. He stretched his muscles freely, and smiled a bitter smile to himself. He said, "The door opens outward. Please give room."

He turned the key in the lock, and slammed the door open. Then he leaped forward.

He could bear the shouts of horror, he could see them standing there petrified. It was a reaction that he had counted on. A policeman fired his revolver, but so excitedly that every bullet missed, while he yelled, "It's not human. It's not human!"

The gravity was a little too great here for

him to do any real flying, but at least his wings, unfolded at last, could take him high into the air in the great room, terrifying and confusing them. As he slowly floated down, he could see them racing around madly. He headed for the door to an outer room. A policeman who was standing in his path could not move his bulk out of the way in time. Kayin crashed into him and sent him sprawling. Then, from behind him, another policeman aimed a blow with the butt of his gun. With his extra eyes Kayin saw what was happening, and a blow of his great wings knocked the policeman down.

Then he was running down the corridor, using his wings to give him a little extra speed. The door through which he had just come swung open again, and a bullet sang past him, tearing into the non-fleshy part of his wing. He hardly felt it.

He was outside.

The noise of the shooting had spread the alarm. Another policeman came running, took one look at him, closed his eyes, and swayed there. Kayin seized the man's own club and hit him over the head with it. He dragged the unconscious body into a deep, clean, concrete-lined pit that had been reserved for some of the dangerously radioactive byproduct that he was now sure they would never make. In the dark of the pit, he stripped the policeman of the uniform. The man was broad across the shoulders, and the uniform fitted nicely across Kayin's wings.

Now he leaped out of the pit, adding his yells to those of the others. A car, the one in which Blayson and Lymer had arrived, was standing parked at the edge of the yard, and he slipped into it. He was out of the yard before they realized what was happening.

But a policeman's uniform, he knew, was too conspicuous. A mile away, he stopped a puzzled truck driver, threatened the man with his revolver, and drove away a moment later with an extra, less conspicuous suit of clothes. He turned on the radio and learned, as he had suspected, that an alarm for him had already been broadcast.

He left the car on a deserted side road, and changed into his truck driver's outfit. He knew enough now about human customs to feel momentarily safe. And he knew enough

also to realize that they would institute a nationwide search for a strange creature with wings. He would not be safe for long. He had to get back to his ship, of which, fortunately, they knew nothing. They might suspect, but they could have no idea of where he had hidden it.

THAT night, still dressed as a truck driver, he broke into a factory that made electrical appliances. When he left, he had with him most of what he needed for repairs.

It was two days later that he reached his ship with a supply of food. He hoped that he had been unobserved, but he could not be sure. He set to work, using the Earth-made supplies to patch up, in makeshift fashion, the damage caused by the crash.

Another two days and the ship would open. He was short on fuel, but if he looked for it, he knew he could find enough to send him on his way and leave this planet for good.

He realized now that he didn't want to leave. In the days he had spent here, he had gradually lost some of his feeling of loneliness. Almost despite themselves, these human beings had made him feel like one of them. Their planet would never take the place of the one he had left, but in many ways it had become a second home to him.

He had made it uninhabitable for himself. If he had said nothing, done nothing, then no one would have suspected, and he would have been allowed to stay—until disaster struck them all.

At least he had delayed that. The radio that night brought him the news that Blayson, who had been slightly injured in the struggle, had been taken to a hospital, his mind temporarily gone under the shock of what had happened. He would be unable, for the time, to reconstruct what Kayin had destroyed. Lymer, disheartened by the loss, had announced that he had no plans for rebuilding the factory. Despite their stupidity, Kayin had won them a respite.

He had won nothing for himself. The following day he heard warning sounds, and saw groups of men closing in around the ship. He was pleased to see that, despite all difficulties, they had traced the path he had taken. They were not so stupid after all.

He went into his ship, and the door slid shut. Night was falling, and in the darkness the ship leaped upward at a sharp angle. Now there would be hundreds of people who saw the shooting star, but this time a star that shot upward.

He rose to a height of twenty miles, and remained at that level, cruising slowly. Far above, he could see through the viewplates the star—Vega, they called it here—which was his native sun. Already an exile from his homeland, he was now being exiled from his second home.

Suddenly he knew that being exiled once was enough. He was tired of fleeing through space, tired of making friends and then being forced to leave them. He had made a home here, and here he would stand and fight.

Below him, the surface of the planet was now rocky and deserted. The ship began to

sink. It was still dark, and the vessel came to rest slowly and inconspicuously upon a craggy peak where there was little danger that any human being would stumble upon it. Far below he could see the outline of a town, picked out of the darkness by light reflected from clouds above. Looking through a distance viewer he could even distinguish the individual lights, and he was able to read a sign that flaunted its message boldly alongside a bridge: WELCOME TO HARDENDALE.

He smiled, and said softly, in the language that was no longer strange to him, "I accept the invitation."

Stretching his wings, he parachuted down through the darkness to level ground, prepared to become once more a member by adoption of the human race. And this time, as he walked cautious and alone through the night, he no longer felt lonely.

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THE MAN THE WORLDS REJECTED

By DICKSON GORDON

For a thousand years Earth was the obyss of the universe; poriah of all the worlds; scorned by the younger planets. Earthman Thorpe guessed of the deep-space price he'd have to pay to corry back just one iota of culture.

THICK fingers of a giant's hand moved softly, caressing the ancient binding of the dark volume under the iridescent rainbow of the ceiling lights in the private library.

"So you want it back?" said Doreleyo.

Pioneer and crime boss of the City of Jark on Tenia, latter-day human with his near seven feet of height and three hundred pounds of heavy bone and muscle, he raised his leonine head from contemplation of the book. A golden tunic of living cloth, the vortlyct pseudo-life form that the Pioneer worlds had domesticated, clung about his massive shoulders. A Tenian love-bird perched on his gargantuan fist, gazing upward at her master with obsessed eyes, pouring out a song of adoration for him.

The young man who stood opposite the giant on the far side of the desk with two seven foot guards a pace behind was slim and a bare six feet in height. His tunic, breeches and boots were of the archaic wool and leather, drab in comparison with Dore-

leyo. But for all that, there was a sureness about him. The boss looked without kindness at him as he answered.

"Yes," said Jack Thorpe. "It belongs to Earth."

There was a small whisper of movement behind Jack, reminder of the two other Pioneerers, musclemen for the city boss, who stood waiting just inside the room.

"To Earth!" echoed Doreleyo's heavy voice derisively. "Look, Earthman, the good is gone from that planet of yours. It's been gone for a thousand years. Only the dregs of the race are left there; little slugs like yourself, rotting in the ruins."

It was the common argument of the younger planets. A worn record, so deeply engraved in the minds of those who echoed it that protest was useless. But protest was also instinctive.

"That's not true," said Jack.

"No?" grinned Doreleyo. Behind his back Jack could almost feel the answering grins of the two henchmen—bait the Earthman.

"We have had it hard," said Jack. "It has been a bare, hand to mouth existence since Earth was deposed as business and government head for the other planets five hundred years ago. We were left with an exhausted planet; too many cities and a population untrained in the skills of fending for itself. But we have come back."

"How?" grinned Doreleyo as the love-bird fluttered on his fist.

"Through training," said Jack. "We have made the most of what little we had. Each Earthman or Earthwoman is trained from birth to do several jobs and do them well. At night we tore down the old cities. In the daytime we planted crops where the buildings had stood. We have lived and we've kept our art, our science and our literature alive. And we didn't ask for help."

"You're a runt," said Doreleyo, looking at Jack. "Bred from dregs, you're dregs." He paused. "And now you come whining to me to get your Shakespeare back."

"The first Folio," said Jack, steadily, with a touch of reverence, looking at the dark book on the polished surface of the table. "One of the few treasures that rich off-planet collectors have left us."

"I'm no collector," said Doreleyo.

"It was sent to you by mistake," said Jack.

"We are a poor people, but a collection was taken up to send me all the way to Temia to get the folio back."

"You touch me," replied Doreleyo.

"I'm glad," Jack returned calmly.

"In fact—the big man stretched himself upright in his chair. "I am disposed to be charitable. As I say I am no collector."

Jack smiled. It was a smile of relief that lit up his tanned face.

"Earth will be deeply grateful to you," he said. The crime boss dismissed Earth's gratitude with a wave of his hand.

"Not at all," he continued. "You may have the book."

"Thank you."

"And I will even be lenient in the matter of the price," said Doreleyo.

THE smile froze on Jack's face.

"The price?"

"You didn't expect to get it back for nothing, did you?" replied the crime boss.

"The price—five million interstellar units."

Jack stared at him unbelievably. The love-bird trilled a melody of sheer beauty.

"Well?" demanded Doreleyo. "What do you say?" Jack looked at him.

"I am trying," said Jack, coldly, "to decide whether you are a fool or—"

"What's that?" The bull roar of the Pioneer's angry voice thundered through the library.

"Only a fool would seriously entertain the notion," said Jack, "that Earth could afford to pay five million, or even five thousand interstellar units for the return of the folio, precious as it is to us. I was empowered—" he hesitated.

Doreleyo checked his anger suddenly. A touch of cupidity narrowed his eyes.

"Go on," he said harshly, "you were empowered—"

"In the event," Jack said, "that you returned the folio to us in good condition, I was empowered to convey to you Earth's most sincere thanks; and to give you—this."

He reached inside his cloak to the pocket of his tunic and brought out a small square box.

Doreleyo snatched it up. Under the pressure of his heavy fingers it snapped open.

and a small medal tinkled on the table. Five small rubies made the points of a star around a cluster of tiny white diamonds and a short, green ribbon depended from it.

"The diamond star," said Jack reverently. "Earth's highest honor."

"You—" The crime boss choked. With a sudden gust of rage he picked up the medal and flung it at Jack. The sharp point of one of the gems slashed Jack's cheek, letting a tiny trickle of blood well out on the surface. The medal dropped back to the table in front of the Earthman.

As he got to his feet the enormous hands of the two musclemen encircled Jack.

Doreleyo's face was livid.

"An Earth decoration!" he said, thickly. "Do you think I could wear *that* with pride?" He jerked his head at the two men holding Jack. "Throw him out!" Him and his toy star for a book worth a fortune!

Jack was dragged toward the entrance. At the door, however, the sound of Doreleyo's voice checked the musclemen.

"Wait a minute," said the boss of the City of Jark. "See what he's got on him."

A large hand reached inside Jack's cloak to his tunic pocket and came away holding the contents.

"Bring them here," said Doreleyo. While one man continued to hold Jack, the other took the small handful of valuables to the desk where Doreleyo spread them out. A return ticket to Earth and a thin sheaf of unit notes. Doreleyo raked them into a pile and grinned vengefully across them at Jack.

"I'll accept the money as the price of an option on the repurchase of the folio," he said. "As for the ticket—this world was good enough for my ancestors when they landed here broke, driven out by your wealthy Earth business and government men. It should be good enough for you. Take him away, boys."

Jack felt himself tumbled out on to the hard pavement. He rolled over and sat up, dizzy and half stunned.

The diamond star flashed in the light of Tenia's hot, blue sun and tinkled on the pavement beside him.

He picked up the star and staggered to his feet. Wrapping the star carefully in his handkerchief he turned away and stepped

on the traveling walkaway powered by Tenia's great solar accumulators—the common carrier of surface traffic in the City of Jark.

"Honor me, Friend—" the Pioneer greeting, in the soft, musical tones of a woman's voice made him spin around.

"You're the Earthman, aren't you?" the girl went on.

JACK stared at her in surprise. She must have come up behind him silently on the resilient surface, walking, or perhaps even running to better the speed of the walkaway. But it was neither this, nor the fact that she was undeniably beautiful with black hair, a slim, patrician face, and level green eyes, that startled him so. What caused the sense of shock was the fact that he found himself looking down not up, into her eyes. This woman, whose dress and accent left no doubt that she was a Pioneer, was a good six inches shorter than he—no taller than an ordinary Earth woman.

"That's right," he answered, "I'm Jack Thorpe. You—"

"Neya Varden," she introduced herself. "Look—" her voice was urgent, "I want to talk to you."

"Go ahead," he said.

She hesitated. A touch of indecision and embarrassment became obvious in her manner.

"Not here," she answered. "I mean—well, not in public." He looked puzzled.

"I'm sorry—" she really was embarrassed now. It showed in the nervous twisting of her hands. "It's just that I have my job to think of; and—well, you are an Earthman."

For a moment he continued to stare at her. Then comprehension slowly dawned. Almost, he looked at the slim softness of her in disgust.

"Am I that much of a leper?" he asked bitterly. "Just because I come from the home world?"

"Not to me," she said swiftly. "Look, my cube isn't far from here. Let's go there, and I'll tell you what I want to see you about."

Jack looked at her curiously.

"All right," he answered, "I will."

Neya Varden's cube—the one room, all-purpose living quarters which honeycombed

the interiors of the great apartment buildings of the poorer classes in Pioneer cities—was barely large enough to let them sit comfortably together at the table that let down from the wall. Neya Varden produced a couple of small bottles of Krysla, the native wine, which with their tops removed, became instead, rather large glasses of the mildly alcoholic beverage. Jack touched his to his lips out of politeness and set it down again.

"You aren't drinking," said Neya, nervously.

"I'm sorry," there was a note of regret in Jack's voice.

"It's not drugged!" she snapped sharply.

"I'm sure it's not," said Jack. "But on Earth we're trained from the cradle on to keep ourselves always in the most efficient working order. There's not much alcohol in this, but—" he hesitated—"after a lifetime of that you get hyper-sensitive. Where this merely relaxes you and induces a slight euphoria, I can feel the slight blunting of my senses and the dulling of my perceptions. Instead of making me feel better, it makes me feel worse. Even a little fuzziness irritates me."

"I see," she answered, looking down at the table.

"I'm sorry," said Jack. "What was it you wanted to talk to me about?"

She lifted her head. Beneath her purple tunic, her breasts rose and fell almost defiantly.

"How'd you like to hire me?" she asked.

Jack allowed some of the surprise he felt to show in his face.

"What?"

"Startles you, doesn't it?" she laughed a little harshly. "A Pioneer girl offering to lower herself by hiring out to an Earthman."

"As a matter of fact, no," said Jack. "What surprises me is the fact that you should think I need help of any kind."

"People can always use servants," she said, innocently, "can't they? And I could be useful—" she went on with a rush, "I can do office or household work, I've been working in one of the night clubs here because the money's better, but I can get good references. And—" she sat back with a smile, playing her trump card—"I'll pay my own way back to Earth."

"My dear Miss Varden," said Jack helplessly, with a touch of embarrassment. "Nobody has any servants on Earth."

She stared at him.

"I don't believe you. Who does all the dirty work?"

"If there's dirty work to be done," answered Jack, "I guess everyone does his own." He looked at her sympathetically. "Earth is still a poor world, even five hundred years after the Separation." He paused. "You don't understand, do you?"

She shook her head, her eyes bright with suspicion.

"I think you're just trying to put me off."

He tried to explain.

"When the empire got too big for Earth to control," he said, "and the younger planets pulled away, the first few generations nearly reverted all the way to savagery. You see the Earth population had been just about ninety per cent executives, with no practical knowledge outside of the rarefied work they did as Government or industrial heads of far-flung firms. Earth nearly collapsed. And when we did start to pull ourselves together, we realized that a drastic change would have to be made."

A slight smile touched the corners of his lips as these last words came out. This following part of the story was one that all Earth people of his generation looked on with fondness and a touch of pride.

"Half measures wouldn't work," Jack went on. "Drastic steps had to be taken. We left the adults to muddle along the best they could. But we turned to the children with the future of the home world in mind; and we began to set up a system of training that would give them the greatest chance of survival."

He paused, looking at her a little sideways, to see if she understood.

"Humans as a race," he said, "had never exploited their own minds and bodies, really. Not properly, not fully. Here and there there had been an individual who fell in love with the possibilities inherent in himself; and made his own effort at self-training. But it had never been put on an organized basis as we started to put it then."

She stared at him—puzzled, a little uncertain and disbelieving. But he was caught up in his story and had nearly forgotten her.

II

"THERE were many things to do," he went on. "It took a number of generations to do them. First we needed good aptitude tests—tests that could begin to function from the time the child began to walk and talk. Then we had to arrange to squeeze our meager standard of living still tighter to allow the individual full time and opportunity for his training and his schooling while he was growing up. And we had to set up a system that made it certain that we did not hammer the growing mind and body into a mold, but instead let it develop in its own natural direction but aided it to fulfill all the potentialities of that development. In the maximum development of the individual we pinned our hopes of the future of the world."

He looked back at her.

"And it worked," he concluded.

"I didn't ever hear that," she said, somewhat defensively. He sighed.

"You don't, of course," he answered. "They teach us the truth back home. The Pioneers, as all you people call yourselves on the younger planets, did have just cause to hate Earth for a time when my world was nothing but one planet-wide glorified board of directors. They haven't, any longer. But the historical attitude persists," he grimaced slightly. "There's a guilt complex partly responsible for that, too, on the part of your Pioneers."

"Us?" said Neya, resentfully. "Why?"

"We are still the source of your traditions," Jack said. "Earth is still the home world, the birthplace of the race. The younger planets are like a son who, having thrown off parental control and gone on to rise to a more fortunate state, now feels his conscience nagging him, and to justify his past and present actions, keeps reminding himself of old grievances."

She bit her lip and looked away from him. Then she looked back.

"What's all this got to do with my being hired by you?" she demanded.

"I was just trying to explain why that's impossible," he said. "I can't hire anyone—" he chuckled ruefully, "particularly now."

"Why not—now?" she pounced on the word.

Briefly, he told her of his reason for coming; and of his interview with Doreleyo. For a moment she sat, stunned. Then her face lit up.

"You're broke! she cried triumphantly.

He nodded, puzzled.

"Well then, there's no problem," she went on, happily. "You don't have your ticket to get back on, do you? And Earth hasn't any consulate here."

"No," agreed Jack, wondering what she was driving at.

"I've saved enough money for my passage to Earth," she said. "But I didn't dare go by myself. I'd land there without a unit to my name and not knowing where to turn. Now I'll tell you what. I'll lend you enough to put in a deep-space call back to Earth for money to come home on. You pay me back when you get it. We can both leave on the next ship two weeks from now." As if to clinch her argument she added, "There won't be another one for over a year."

He shook his head.

"Why not?" she cried, exasperated.

"I can't send for more money," he said. "They don't have it to spare, back there. We have almost no trade with other worlds, and interstellar units are precious. Besides—I haven't gotten what I came for."

"The book?" she said, incredulously. "But Doreleyo said he wouldn't give it to you."

"I'm sorry," said Jack. "But I can't go back without it." She stared at him, her green eyes wide with amazement.

"You're insane!"

"I don't think so," said Jack. He checked himself suddenly. "Just why do you want to go to Earth so badly, anyway?"

"Do you have to ask that?" she answered bitterly. "Look at me!"

He looked at her, at the black hair, the smouldering eyes, the firm and pleasant mouth. He shook his head.

"I don't understand," he said. She looked incredulous, then—

"Perhaps you don't," she replied slowly. A touch of scorn came into her voice. "Of course you don't. An Earthman like you wouldn't. But it's plain enough to me. No man on a Pioneer world would look twice at me. I'm not good. A throw-back. A sport. A runt. Like you."

There was a moment's embarrassed silence between them following her declaration.

"I see," said Jack, gently, at last.

He got to his feet.

"I'm sorry I can't help you," he said, an honest note of regret in his voice, moving toward the door.

"Wait—" she was up on her feet and coming around the table to face him again and halt him. "You can't be serious about trying to get the book from Doreleyo, now."

"I must," he answered. "It means too much to Earth."

"He'll kill you," she cried. "Don't you know that? Here in the city of Jark, the Boss controls everything. All the businessmen, the criminal gangs, even the police are his. The city officials are his men. No one will help you. Do you hear me? No one! Earthman, you're insane!"

"Thanks for the warning," he said. "I was going to talk to the police and the city council."

"Then you've changed your mind?" He sighed a little.

"No," he said, quietly.

SHE stood back to let him pass. He inclined his head politely to her and opened the door. As he was stepping out she caught his arm.

"Come back here," she said. He yielded to the pressure of her fingers. She drew him slowly back into the apartment, shut the door and stood for a long moment looking at him.

"I don't understand you," she said at last, wonderingly. "Are all Earthmen like you?"

"We are what we are," said Jack.

"But why? Why?" she said. "Don't you believe me when I tell you how things are here?"

"I believe you," answered Jack.

"Then what is it in this for you—to make you try the impossible and risk your life this way?"

"In it for me?" Jack echoed, bewildered. He smiled a little sadly. "There's nothing in it for me. It's just a belief—my own belief—that the Folio belongs to Earth and should go back there."

She released him.

"You are a very strange man," she said. "Or else you are insane."

Jack bowed to her in the Pioneer fashion

and turned to go.

"Wait," she said. "What are you going to do now? You say your money is gone. Where will you stay? How will you eat?"

"I don't know," he replied honestly. She drew a deep breath.

"Then stay here," she said. "At least for a few weeks. At least until you get this mad notion out of your head."

"Here?" he echoed.

"I can support both of us," she said. "I do rather well waitressing odd nights in one of the bars. I'm—" her tone became bitter—"something of a novelty."

"And you want me to stay," repeated Jack, gently. He looked at her. There was a hopeless sadness in her eyes—the look of an outcast.

"I've been lonely all my life," she said, frankly, answering his look. "Yes, Jack Thorpe, strange man from Earth. I want you to stay."

—Later that night she woke him, clutching at him fiercely in the darkness.

"But when you go back to Earth, you take me with you!" she hissed. "Promise!"

"I promise," Jack answered.

THE next two days Jack spent at the City Library. The second night Neya worked; and late the following morning when she woke up, Jack was already dressed and waiting with questions for her.

"Tell me," he said abruptly, as she propped herself up on one elbow in the bed and pushed the heavy hair back from her sleepy eyes, "who'd be liable to object if I suddenly started making money here in Jark?"

She blinked at him uncomprehendingly.

"Object?" she echoed. "Nobody'd object. Why should they?"

"This city," he said patiently, "is very tightly organized. Surely—"

"Oh, I know what you mean," she yawned. "You'd just have to pay. Your boss, your union—"

"I was thinking of working for myself in a professional, advisory capacity," said Jack. "I was thinking of offering a sort of advisory service to local businessmen."

Her eyes came wide open. Her warm lips parted in amazement.

"Could you do something like that?" she

asked, incredulously. Would it pay?"

"It should pay very well," he replied, a trifle stiffly.

"Why, Jack!" she said, sitting up suddenly, her eyes alight. "That's-marvelous. You go check with our district gang leader right away. His name's Ki Maneo—" she hopped out of bed and ran to the writing table. "Here, I'll give you the district headquarters address." She smiled at him almost shyly and picked up a stylus.

"District Leader?" echoed Jack. "Ki Maneo."

"Oh, I forgot you didn't know," she answered, busily writing. "There's four district leaders in the city, one for each section. They head all the musclemen of the gangs for that section. You've got to let them know ahead of time what you're going to do and then pay them a percentage of what you make or they'll queer your job." She picked up the sheet of white plastic on which she had pressed the name and address of the District Leader and brought it over to him. "Don't forget, now." A note of concern warmed her voice.

A little smile touched the corners of his lips.

"That's the last thing I'll do," he promised her.

"ALL right, Earthman," said the businessman. "I'll listen. But it better be worth my while."

The Pioneer who spoke was a tough, sal-low-faced giant. His cold eyes went across the desk to meet Jack, seated in front of him. A miniature artificial sun burned glaringly in the air above them.

"It's simple," Jack answered. "Most of the fabrication on these young worlds of yours is done by machinery. There's only a few shops like yours who do custom work requiring skilled workers. On Earth nearly all our production is the result of physical labor. We have evolved production techniques which you might find useful, Kel Lennan."

"I take it that you're an expert in these techniques." Kel's fingers ran over a row of buttons on his desk.

"Among other things," said Jack. "yes."

"All right. Go on."

"Here's my proposition. I will show you

how to increase the productivity of your workers for ten per cent of any profits over a ten year period, or a flat two thousand interstellar units payable a week from now provided production has increased by at least twenty-five percent."

Kel laughed and reached for the buttons. "You're crazy," he said. "Go on, peddle your nonsense to somebody else."

"All right," said Jack. He rose and left. He was leaving the outer office when a secretary came running after him to call him back. He returned.

"What's the matter with you?" grumbled Kel Lennan. "Don't you know anything about business? You don't have too rush off. I was just building up to saying your terms are too steep."

"Sorry," said Jack, turning again, "if they're too steep, you shouldn't have called me back."

"Come back here!" roared the Pioneer. "Sit down. Let's talk this out like sensible men."

Three-quarters of an hour later, Kel had agreed to the two thousand flat rate. Mopping his brow and looking disgusted he pressed one of the buttons. One apparently solid wall of the office dissolved, revealing the shop.

Jack looked it over. It was a small plant engaged in turning out custom scanners. The scanners themselves came in a kit from a larger factory and were assembled by apprentices at one long table. At another long table the case builders did the finishing work. There were several types of scanners and it was the apprentice's job to pick the type that the master workman needed to fit the custom job he was building. When the kit was assembled, the apprentice would carry it over to his particular master and that man would begin work on turning its outward appearance into whatever the customer wanted. There were some pretty weird wants, evidently. Jack saw scanners being disguised as everything from stuffed animals to large windows. It was a simple organization, and, to Jack's Earth-trained eye, a horribly inefficient one.

"Well?" demanded the outworld businessman. "See any way to cut corners?"

Jack considered half a dozen and picked the quickest.

"There's one," he said slowly, "that I think would just about double production."

Kel Lennan stared at him.

III

IN THE following days, Jack talked to other factory owners. At the end of the following week he was back in the office of Kel Lennan, this time with Neyla. The businessman met him with a beaming face.

"Marvelous," he said, "marvelous." And he led them to the factory room.

The physical appearance of the plant had been changed. Instead of two long tables at opposite sides of the room, the space was occupied by a double tier of desks, an upper desk alternating with a lower, all along the line. Directly beside and below each master craftsman sat his apprentice, so that once a kit was completed, it merely needed to be passed up.

"Wonderful," said Lennan. "Production is way up." He led them back to his office. "Though to be honest with you, I can't understand why saving the apprentices a few steps should make such a difference."

"It doesn't," answered Jack, calmly, as they entered the Pioneer's office. "You saved something there, but not much. What makes the real difference is the fact that now the masters and apprentices are separated from their fellows. Before, with each worker at his own class table, there was a natural temptation to talk and dawdle. Now, with this separation, everybody is isolated and has nothing to do but get on with his work. The physical change merely maneuvers them into keeping their nose to the grindstone."

Kel stared at him and then burst into a roar of laughter.

"I'll be shot!" he roared, his big voice making the walls echo. "I will be shot! So that's the trick." He went around the desk in his office and sat down, pulling out a voucher book. He picked up a stylus.

"It's a good thing I'm an honest man," he said. "Otherwise I'd be tempted to cheat you out of your two thousand, now that I know how you made it. But—" he started to write. Jack reached out and caught his hand.

"Not that way," he said.

"What?" the big businessman looked up with a sudden frown.

"I've got an account at the City Bank," said Jack. "Call them on the visco and sign a facsimile tab for a transfer of funds from your account to mine."

"What's the matter?" rumbled Kel angrily. "Isn't my check good enough for you?"

"Your check is perfectly good," said Jack. "It's just that I have a dislike of carrying it out into the street." His eyes met those of Kel and locked. "It shouldn't make any difference to you. As you say, you're an honest man."

Neyla stared at Jack. It was on the tip of her tongue to protest. This was no way for an Earthman to treat even a minor businessman.

"Well?" said Jack.

Kel snorted, but complied.

Once out on the street again Neyla turned toward Jack and opened her mouth with the intention of giving him a lesson in Pioneer manners; but he spoke first, cutting her short.

"Go home," he said.

"What—?" she cried.

"Or, on second thought," he went on. "Don't go home. Go someplace else. Anyplace where you're unknown; and stay there until I get in touch with you."

"But why?"

"I can't explain now."

"It looks to me," she said, her eyes narrowing, "as if, now that you've got some money in your hands, you want to get rid of me."

For answer, he reached into his pocket and brought out the tab of his account at the city bank. It was a joint account, in her name as well as his. Her face burned.

"Now will you go!" he said impatiently.

"Yes—" she stammered. "I—" She turned and made off through the crowd. He stood and watched until her slender figure disappeared among the looming seven foot forms, then turned and hailed a ground cab.

He had just come out of the place where he was making his fourth collection on a job such as he had done for Kel, when two large Pioneers closed in upon him. They

herded into a waiting ground cab. They sped into the traffic tunnels below the city level.

Jack asked no questions. He did not even protest when, during the later part of the ride, they blindfolded him with impersonal neatness and dispatch. These were not the ordinary kind of bodyguard, but accredited thugs of the gangs themselves, men completely outside and above the law who made no secret of their profession, but flaunted its badges—the scalp-lock on the shaved skull, the warp pistol worn openly on the hip, the duelling scars and the knife rings on each man's index finger that had made them. Killers, nothing more. Words would be wasted on them.

AFTER awhile the car stopped, Jack was made to walk a short distance, and the blindfold was removed. Jack found himself facing four large, scalp-locked Pioneers seated behind a long table. Beyond them, in a corner, stood Neya. Tears filled her eyes as she looked at him, from between the two thugs that held her.

"Well, Earthman," said the largest of the seated men, "Do you know where you are?"

"I have a fairly good idea," replied Jack. His voice was as steady as ever. The man leaned forward. "Central City Headquarters for the Gangs of Jark," Jack went on. "You, I imagine, will be Ki Maneo, and these others, leaders of the other four city sections."

The man who had spoken looked at him steadily for a long minute.

"Since you know that," he said, "you won't deny you knew that you're supposed to contact a Leader before working in his district, or that you've been working in all sections without notifying any of us?"

"I won't," said Jack. "I did it deliberately."

"Why?"

"I wanted to get you all together," replied Jack.

It was a simple answer but it produced a surprising reaction. The glances of all four men flickered uneasily towards each other. The voice of Ki Maneo was harsh, when he spoke again.

"Why?" The grim reiteration held its own threat.

"As you know," said Jack blandly, "I came here to get back the Folio of 1623. Doreleyo has offered to sell it back to me for a price. Consequently, I am raising money; and I have a weapon in which you gentlemen might be interested."

"What weapon?" broke in one of the other Leaders, a man whose heavy features were already sagging into fat. "The young worlds are five hundred years ahead of your planet scientifically, Earthman."

"That is no longer true," said Jack. "In the past century we have made fantastic strides, due to several important basic discoveries. It is we who are five hundred years ahead. Do you think I would have deliberately invited you to have me brought here otherwise?"

"I think," said another one of the Leaders, "that you're doing some fast talking to save your neck. You know damn well we'd never have let you get away with this advisory service if you'd come to us first. There's no jobs for Earthmen in Jark. You tried to make a killing and get off planet without letting us know. Now you're talking fast."

Jack chuckled. Neya, watching, stared at him in disbelief. It was inhuman to be that cool in the face of the situation.

"Luckily I've got proof," Jack was saying.

"Proof?" It was the first speaker again.

"A model of the weapon," said Jack. "I knew you'd pick me up, so I've been carrying it with me." He reached for his wallet pocket.

"Hold it!" At a sharp command from the man who had been doing most of the talking, one of the two who had picked Jack up, came forward. He rifled Jack's pocket and came up with a small cube surmounted by a disk, which he carried to the table, and set down. The four men looked at it blankly.

"It's crude," said Jack, "because it's homemade. One of your factories could turn out a better product." He half rose from his chair. "If you'll let me—"

Heavy bands of the guard at his back forced him down again.

"Never mind that!" snapped the spokesman of the group. He reached out and picked the object up curiously. As he did, the disk began to revolve slowly, unfolding

as it went until it had spread to a good eight inches in diameter. Hastily, at the first sign of movement, the Leader had set it down again. Now he and the others watched the spinning disk closely. It was colored with an odd pattern of black lines on the white plastic that was the disk proper, lines which twisted and melted together with the rotation of the disk, that caught and held the eye with a strange fascination.

"You pressed the warm-up button there," Jack was saying. "The disk is the real secret of the weapon. Observe the disk closely, notice the pattern made by the lines. In addition to other functions, the pattern is very relaxing. Most relaxing. It makes you feel sleepy. Watching it, you feel quite sleepy. In fact, you are going to sleep. You are falling into a deep sleep. You are falling deeper into a deep, deep sleep. You are deeply asleep. Join your hands together in front of you."

LIKE automatons, the four Leaders and Neya clasped their hands in front of them. Turning around, Jack saw that the two men who had brought him in had also obeyed.

"You cannot pull your hands apart," said Jack. "Try."

The faces of the various people in the room contorted as they made the effort to separate their hands. But the fingers remained locked.

"You will do whatever I tell you," said Jack. "You are falling deeper asleep. You are falling very deeply into deep, deep sleep. You are fast asleep."

The room slumbered. Jack let out a long breath, then got up and walked over to Neya.

"Everybody else will go on sleeping," he said. "They will sleep deeper into deep, deep sleep. But Neya Varden will wake up, now!"

Neya stirred, blinked, and opened her eyes. She looked up at him.

"What happened?" she whispered.

"I hypnotized all of you," said Jack. "Hypnotized?"

"An old technique," answered Jack.

"Your people have forgotten now that psychology and medicine have become so effective. Stand over in the corner now and

don't look at the disk. I've got to give these people some instructions."

She obeyed. He walked back to stand at one side with the six hypnotized men in view.

"You are deeply asleep," he said. "And you are falling still more deeply asleep. You will forget anything I have said to you and remember only what I tell you to remember. You will remember only that when you had me brought here I revealed to you that the science of Earth far outstrips the science of any of the other planets; and that I am a master of that science. You will realize that any attempt to harm me may result in Earth, with its advanced science, destroying you all. You will believe whatever I tell you; and you will leave orders with your underlings that any message or visit from me is to be called to your attention at once. And finally, whenever I tell you in the future to go to sleep, or snap my fingers like this—" he snapped his fingers by way of illustration—"you will go to sleep at once. Now you will remember all this when you wake up, but forget anything I said before you went to sleep. And you will not know you have been to sleep. Now—" He slapped the table sharply with his hand.

—"WAKE UP!"

The men moved, opened their eyes and looked up blankly.

"Well, gentlemen," said Jack, sharply. "Now that I have shown you what I really am, I'm sure I can trust you to keep my secret." His voice took on a hard edge. "It would not be a good idea if the knowledge got out."

His eyes probed down the table, and, one by one, they muttered assent.

"If I need you, then, I'll call on you. Good-bye, gentlemen. Come on, Neya."

Obediently, she followed him. They went past the guards and out the door of the room, shutting it behind them. And they found themselves in a long corridor, stretching off to both sides of them.

"This way," Jack directed, turning to his left and starting off briskly. She hurried after him.

"Do you know where you're going?" she whispered sharply. He looked to one side and down at her.

"Of course," he said.

"But you were blindfolded when they brought you in," she persisted, still in a whisper.

"Oh, that," said Jack, and chuckled. He said no more until, after descending several levels of stairs and traversing several corridors, they came abruptly out into a traffic tunnel through a small door that from the outside looked as if it opened on a tunnel service storeroom. Jack flagged down a cab.

"It's just a matter of training," he explained, when they were safely on their way. "It was easy to get lost in the wildernesses of the great cities, when Earth people started tearing them down, so they taught us too how to find our way back from anywhere. It's a matter of a highly developed directional sense, plus a practised time sense, and a good memory. That's all."

He smiled down at her.

IV

THEY were seated together at lunch on the terrace of Jark's best hotel. Below them, the Pioneer city lay spread out from horizon to horizon, a limitless cluster of low, well-spaced buildings. The hotel they were in was no more than a dozen stories and it was far and away the tallest building in Jark.

He turned back to Neya, who was sitting across the table from him and toying with her meal.

"You aren't eating," he said.

She had been mincing up her meat with the little, sharp-edged silver tongs that were the standard Pioneer eating utensils. Now she laid them down with almost an air of relief and looked squarely at him.

"No, I'm not."

"Something bothering you?"

"You might as well know it now. As fast as you were putting money into that joint account, I was taking it out." She reached into her purse pocket and came out with two stamped strips of plastic. "I bought these."

He looked at them. They were a pair of one way tickets to Earth.

"That's how they picked me up and brought me to the City Headquarters," she said, half-defiantly. "They were waiting outside the space terminal when I came out."

"Well—" Jack shrugged. "It's a good use for the units."

She continued to look at him, a little baffled.

"It isn't going to work," she said, after a short pause. "You know that, don't you?"

"What isn't?"

"Getting that book back," she said fiercely. "Don't you—can't you see that you're playing with fire?"

He looked at her in surprise.

"I thought you were interested in helping me?" he said.

"I didn't think you'd be trying the sort of thing you're doing," she cried. "I thought you'd see sense after a few days and give up."

"You actually don't believe I have a chance, do you?" he asked sadly, watching her closely.

"I know you don't!"

"Didn't that last little scene give you any confidence in me?"

"That!" she said, desperately. "A trick. And what good did it do you, except to take the pressure off our necks for the moment? We're safe now, yes. If we stay quiet and don't attract any attention we can take off without any more trouble, probably. But you're still thinking about that book."

"Of course," he said soberly. "I think I told you I wouldn't leave without it."

She forced her voice down to a whisper so that its passion would not carry. But the tension in her voice came to him.

"But why?" she whispered bitterly between her teeth. "Why?"

"You mean why risk my life for a book?"

"Yes."

"It's my job," he said.

"Oh," she leaned back in her chair, her voice flat and empty. "A job. Is that it?"

"You don't understand," he said.

"I think I do."

"You don't!" His tone left no doubt of the matter. There was a hard note in it she had never heard before. "Listen, Earth is a poor planet, but she doesn't have to be."

"I know," she said coldly. "You told me. You're rebuilding her. She has a great future."

"That's not what I mean," he answered. "Earth never had to be poor. Even right from the moment when her power was

stripped away she could have been well off. Well off on charity."

She looked at him with uncertain suspicion. Tensely, he leaned across the table toward her.

"Do you remember what I told you about the Pioneer guilt complex where Earth was concerned?" he said, lowering his voice. "Right from the start of her downfall there were people on the younger planets who wanted to help her—secretly. On all the inhabited worlds they added up to several millions who revered the mother planet. That ancestral tie is not something all people can ignore. We could have had help—private help—right from the start. We can have it now."

She looked at him as if she no longer had any doubt of his complete insanity, and the insanity of the world from which he came.

"Why don't you take it then?"

His mouth was a grim line with something of harsh pride in it. In an odd mixture of emotions she put her hand over his.

"We are a people too," he said.

His fury gripped her, at the same time as her mind stumbled in its lack of comprehension. She could only stare at him, fascinated. With a sudden angry gesture he threw her hand off.

"If we were wrong," he said, leaning across the table, "if we were wrong to try to rule the race, how much more wrong we'd be if, having failed, having lost everything but our guts and brains, we let ourselves be turned into pets of that same race. Runts, you Pioneers call us. Dregs, leavings of the adventuresome spirit of the people. You're wrong. The thing that took men up from the dust in the first place rebuilds him again and again. We were wrong in thinking we were masters; but by heaven above and the eternal stars we're equals and we'll stand as equals until the last one of us goes down forever."

His hand had closed about a silver vase in the center of the small table. Under the whiplash of his emotion, it tightened; and before Neya's astonished eyes, the slim fingers, so fragile-looking to her Pioneer-born eyes, were crushing the soft metal inward. His words drove through her.

"That book belongs to Earth," he said. "And I am Earth. And I will get it back,

alone if necessary, without help and without favors." He stood up abruptly. Through all the violence of his utterances, he had held his voice to so low a pitch that the neighboring tables had not been disturbed. Now, with his sudden movement, some few people nearby looked up at him. He looked at her with the bitter look of a man who feels himself betrayed. He leaned across the table and flicked the two Earth tickets toward her.

"I've got no need of these," he said. "Use them yourself or turn them in, whichever you prefer. But think it over before you run to Earth. It's no dumping ground or hiding place for weaklings!"

And with that he swung about abruptly on his heel and strode off.

"Jack!" she cried after him, desperately, not caring what the rest of the crowd would think, seeing a Pioneer girl pleading with an Earthman. But Jack was already gone.

NEYA was deeply hurt. When Jack did not return to her cube she threw herself back into the old routine of her life, the heavy daytime sleeping, the night work and the jibes of the other, normal-sized waitresses—for by now it was common gossip that Neya had fallen for an Earthman, who had *cut graves* with her, in the old space lingo that still lingered here and there in Pioneer slang. Six, eight, ten months went by. The hurt inside her faded to a dull ache and when a year was nearly up, she had herself almost convinced that she had put him out of her mind for good.

Then something happened to show her how wrong this supposition was.

Jack had continued with his advisory services. Occasionally she heard him mentioned as a rising young businessman. Then one day, a scrap of conversation between two gray-skinned centaurs she was serving made her heart stand suddenly still.

"—Jack Thorpe," the humanoid entrepreneur who spoke stumbled in pronouncing the archaic cognomen, so that the words came out something like 'Shack Torb'—but they were clear enough to arrest Neya in the process of moving away from the table, "he's due any day now."

It was all she heard. One of the two centaurs, looking up at that moment, happened to catch her eye and she was

forced to move away. But it was enough to set her on the trail.

In the City of Jark, like many Pioneer cities where all the social elements were tightly bound up together, almost any kind of information could be bought if you knew where to hunt a seller. Neya put herself on the track. The end of her quest was a little room in the alien section of Jark where she sat alone and listened to a recording played by she knew not who and piped in from she knew not where. Several voices in social conversation together came to her ear and one of them was the voice of Doreleyo. The bit she heard was brief enough.

"—the fable about the goose who laid the golden eggs."

There was the sound of male laughter, a pause, then a different voice.

"All right, I'm dumb. I don't understand it."

Doreleyo's laughter, alone this time.

"A man had a goose who laid golden eggs. He got greedy and chopped the bird open to get more than his egg a day. He killed the bird and that was all the golden eggs he ever got. Thorpe's laying up eggs for me. That bank account."

"That's why you've been leaving him alone?"

"I—" there was a sudden break where the recording had been censored. Sellers of information gave only what they had been paid for. Doreleyo's voice cut in again suddenly—"Only to a point. He's got nearly a million and that's enough. I'll make it look like he paid that for the book and then took off for Earth."

"And then—"

The recording stopped abruptly, cutting off the unknown speaker. Neya stood up, laid her money on a small table in the room and went out.

V

THE city directory located Jack for her. He was occupying a suite in one of the better hotels. The check-board showed that he was in. She went up in the tube. Purely as an experiment, bribed a bellboy to give her a pass key. She got it immediately, which meant that Jack had not even attempted the customary practice of a protective bribe. The

omission exasperated her for it was so typical of his blithe innocence in this city of wolves. She dismissed the boy and let herself in.

She found herself facing a white wall of light, although the floor-to-ceiling windows that made up one wall of the room were brilliant with daylight. She closed the door behind her and, reaching out a hand, cut the study switch.

The light vanished, revealing Jack seated at a desk piled high with plastic figure sheets and holding a stylus in his hand. He looked up at her.

"Hello, Neya," he said.

She stood and looked at him. The change in his appearance shocked her.

Eleven months appeared to have thinned and aged him. The once-boyish touch to his features had disappeared. A brown stubble shadowed the lower half of his face; and below it the line of his jawbone was thin and sharp. Fatigue had hollowed his eyes and deepened his voice. He was so altered, so different from the man she had been expecting to see, that a strange pang shot through her and the carefully rehearsed scene of her warning that was to bring him at last to his senses, fell apart like a tinsel toy before the solid facts of reality.

"You're tired—" the words rushed from her mouth instinctively.

"Tired I am," he answered with a smile of triumph that lit up his gaunted face. "But I'm through, Neya. I finished last night. I've just been checking."

She came up to him and leaned over the table, putting her hand on his shoulder for support and feeling momentarily the tense hardness of the muscles beneath his tunic. She stared at the sheets of plastic, acrawl with incomprehensible symbols.

"What's this?" she asked. "What have you got?"

He reached out, shook one sheet free of the pile and set it before her. She stared at it, baffled.

"I can't understand it."

"I'll explain it to you," he uncoiled and was on his feet in one smooth motion. "Come on and have lunch with me. We'll celebrate."

"But you need sleep."

"Later," he answered feverishly. "Come

and have lunch." He turned away from her; and, striding across the room to a closet which opened at his touch, he took out a dress cape of woollyct which flickered through the whole spectrum of colors as he twirled it about his shoulders. "We'll go to the Chijaha."

"The Chijaha!" She caught her breath. It was a tourist trap, the most expensive eating place in the City of Jark. Shock brought back the memory of her purpose.

"I came to tell you something—" she began.

"After lunch, he cut her short. "We can talk then."

He hurried her out, placing the sheet of plastic he had shown her in his cape pocket.

THE Chijaha derived its name from the planet of a strange, barbaric people. It was a large, circular, blue-lighted establishment where the staff and entertainers dressed in odd, opulent costumes and weird, unfamiliar music played in the background, softly. But the food was excellent. Neyla, somewhat timid in such lavish surroundings, stuck conservatively to the more common dishes, creosoup, butter fried neyderlings and protein aspic gumbo, watching Jack meanwhile in some awe as he ordered strange things with exotic names such as bluepointoysters, crabmeatsalad, and T-bone-steak. The climax of his lunch was a sweet concoction known as applepie, so rare and so obviously a gourmet's dish that the Chijaha's Alderbaran chef himself brought it in; and, regardless of the fact that Jack was an Earthman, insisted on serving the portion with his own hands.

When the stir caused by this unusual action had died down and Jack and Neyla were left to their hot drink, Jack finally allowed their talk to drop to a serious level. The triumph was still in his eyes but he offered the floor to Neyla first.

"You had something to tell me—" he prompted.

Neyla pushed her hot drink away and leaned forward.

"Doreleyo"—she spoke urgently, instinctively lowering her voice to a secretive level—"I've been checking up. He's been leaving you alone to make money in the hope that he'll sell you back the book. But now he's

decided to crack down on you. I think he's afraid you'll get too much money—become too prominent. He'll get the money from you some way, probably by pretending to sell the book for what you've got. Then he'll have you killed. Jack—" her voice was suddenly tight with emotion—"you've got to believe this. You've got to give up this crazy idea and go hide somewhere until we can get you on the Earth ship. It's due again."

"So soon?" he asked, a touch of interest flaring suddenly in his eyes.

"Early tomorrow morning," she said.

"Don't you ever read the shipping news? They've been rescheduling all the flights. Jack—"

His laugh checked her.

"Why, that's perfect!" he said happily. "That ties right in with my own plans."

"Your plans?" she repeated, stunned.

"Of course, my plans," he leaned forward to her in his turn, pulling the sheet of plastic from his pocket. "You didn't think I had any real hope of saving up the money for the book? The market for the kind of services I've been offering is just about worked out; and the financiers here in Jark have no intention of letting me get into the investment end of things. Besides, all that I've made belongs to Earth. We're desperately in need of interstellar credits at home. No—" he shook his head—"what I needed was time; and I've had time. The solution's here," and he shoved the sheet of plastic toward her.

"What secret?" she demanded suspiciously.

"The secret," he answered triumphantly, "of how to destroy the power of Doreleyo completely here in Jark. To make him as helpless as I was when he first threw me out into the street." He tapped the sheet with his finger. "The blueprint for a revolution."

She stared at him.

"I see," she said at last, her voice oddly withdrawn.

"Here," he said, eagerly. "Let me explain it to you. Every society is rendered stable by careful balancing of its different social elements. Here in Jark, because of rigidity of the setup, we have relatively few powerful groups. I've spent this last year learning about them, their relative positions of power

in city management. The present state of things can be resolved into the terms of symbolic logic—"

He talked on, stabbing odd figures on the plastic sheet to illustrate as he went, his voice low but tense, his eyes bright. Neyla let his words wash over her, paying them no attention. She was busy thinking.

It had struck her that two things were true and had been true for a long time, although for some strange reason they had not penetrated to the conscious level of her mind. For some reason it was this moment here, in this unreal setting of the fantastic restaurant with Jack droning incomprehensible things, that they had chosen to make themselves inescapably obvious to her. One was that Jack was infinitely precious to her. And the second was that he was, tragically, but beyond any shadow of a doubt, insane.

She hid these thoughts behind a half-smile and an interested look on her face as she pretended to follow his explanations. At the first opportunity, she excused herself, saying—"I'll be right back—" and went off toward the ladies' lounge.

She headed for the nearest exit and made her way out into the street.

A force-lift leading down to the traffic tunnels was only a few steps away. She took it, floating down into the shadowed blackness of the tunnels. She stopped for a moment in a public booth to put in a video call; then flagged a cab and gave the driver the number of Doreleyo's headquarters.

VI

IT WAS deceptively easy for her to gain audience with the crime boss. But only someone unused to the big Pioneer cities would have been surprised by it. To Neyla, it was simply one more grim proof that Doreleyo had the situation firmly in hand. Indeed, the boss himself made a point of confirming this opinion as she entered and took the chair his huge hand waved her to.

"Did you enjoy your dinner?" he asked.

"It was pleasant," she answered. He nodded his heavy head gravely. His lovebird preened itself on his fist.

"Our Earthman is quite a gourmet," he said. Abruptly, his manner shifted and his

tone became businesslike. "You wanted to see me?"

"Jack Thorpe is psychotic," she answered without preamble. "Did you know that?"

He half smiled at her stroking the lovebird.

"No," he replied. He paused, as if to let her continue, then, when she said nothing, went on himself. "What of it? What's that to me?"

"Don't you understand?" The words rushed from her lips. "He's not responsible. He wasn't responsible when he landed here. He was right about Earth wanting the book back; but he was lying about the fact that they couldn't and wouldn't pay to get it." Desperation tightened her voice. "Everything he's been doing here has been his own idea. He's insane. I've just been talking to him. He's been working on some fantastic project which he thinks will let him take over the city and force you to give him the book."

"Well—" his voice prodded her, inflexibly, "I repeat—what of it? How does it concern me?"

"Don't you see? Earth will still pay four million credits for the book if you get a sane Terran representative to talk to you. But they won't send anyone else unless it's proved to them that Thorpe is incompetent. Send him back with your demands. You can have him put on the ship forcibly."

Doreleyo stroked his chin. The black voerlyct of his tunic flashed.

"And what about you?"

"I want to get him back safe," she answered. "I won't try to fool you. I'll go on the ship with him and see that your offer reaches the proper people there. And I can take charge of him on the ship. I have some control over him. He—" she lied—"he thinks he's in love with me."

Doreleyo sat in silence, his eyes tilted down toward the desk top in front of him.

"I'd need some guaranty—" he said, finally.

She fumbled in her purse and came up with a bank tab that she tossed on the desk top.

"He set this account up in my name as well as his," she said. "He's never changed it. I called just now to make sure. I can make out a tab turning the whole account

over to you and the bank will honor it."

Doreleyo looked her steadily in the face, his expression unreadable.

"Go ahead," he said.

She took a credit strip and filled it out, then pushed it across the desk to him. He picked it up and frowned at it.

"I've dated it ahead—after the ship leaves," she said, her heart thumping wildly in mingled fear and elation. "That way, right up to the moment we leave, I can stop payment."

A smile crept slowly over his large face.

"You're quite clever, Neya Varden," he said, gently, putting the slip away. "I like clever people. I'm one myself."

"I know it," she answered, watching him closely and wondering.

"I imagine you do," Doreleyo said. "You'll be interested in hearing that I went to the trouble to check up on Earth after your friend's first visit."

Fear began to grow inside her.

"—One of the things I found out," he went on, "was that Earth was actually as poor as our young Earthman said. In fact, when I spaced off my offer to Earth headquarters—which I did immediately after Thorpe had refused it—they replied that such a payment was not only against their customs, but impossible—" he smiled down into her stricken face—"so I don't imagine we'll have to put you to the trouble of that Earth trip after all, Neya Varden. Instead, you can be my guest for a couple of days until the deadline on this check is passed."

He raised his head and looked behind her toward some unseen presence.

"All right," he said. "You can take her away, now."

Neya rose numbly to find her arm grasped by one of Doreleyo's thugs. Furious, she tried to twist herself free, fighting and clawing unsuccessfully.

"Don't take it so hard," said the Crime Boss amiably. "Consider, Neya Varden, the Earthman may still work his plan successfully and rescue you."

His laughter rang in her ears as the thug carried her away.

THEY had doped her with *senetal*. Now they were trying to revive her and her body was sick and dead, pickled in sleep.

It did not want to revive.

"No—no—" she moaned.

But the battering against her drugged state went on. She was being shaken. She was being forced to walk, stumblingly, while a pair of big hands held her. And, worst of all, some new chemical had been forced upon her which was inexorably pushing back the oblivion.

She opened bleary eyes, caught one brief glimpse of the room in which Doreleyo had interviewed her.

Doreleyo was alone with her, looming over the couch on which she lay, his eyes glaring hate.

"You!" said Doreleyo thickly. All the rage the man was capable of was in that one word. The love bird came thrilling to comfort him, but he knocked it away with a sudden sweep of one hand.

She stared up at him blankly. He reached down with his two great hands and shook her. The room blurred about her once again. The breath was knocked out of her as he flung her back down on the couch.

"Or maybe it wasn't you," muttered Doreleyo, staring down at her. "You haven't the brains; you haven't the guts to come in here deliberately and mislead me. It's *his* doing. You were a tool."

Abruptly, he knelt down by the side of the couch and laid his hands heavily upon her. His eyes caught hers and held them.

"You were the Earthman's tool, did you know that?" he asked. "He used you. He used you deliberately. Do you hear me?"

She shook her head weakly. Her voice came out thin and unnatural when she tried to speak.

"What are you talking about?" she said weakly. "I don't believe you."

"He used you. He used you," repeated Doreleyo. "Just like he fooled me. But there's a chance yet. For me and you. For both of us. Help me with this and I'll give you the whole city. You can write your own tab. You can have anything. You can even have me if you want. I'll marry you legally and make a settlement. You'll be rich in your own right. Just remember what he told you."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"It was a trick," said the Crime Boss. His eyes were staring. "Even the book, probably."

There's some reason there besides the book. Nobody would do all that for a book, would they?"

His hands closed on her shoulders, the fingers crushing them. She gave a little cry of pain and they relaxed.

"Do what?" she said. "How can I tell you anything when you won't tell me?"

"Don't you know what I'm talking about?" He thrust his face close to hers.

"Don't you really know what's happened?"

"No!" she cried.

He took a deep breath.

"I'm stripped," he said. "I'm alone, waiting to get my throat cut, like an animal in the slaughterhouse. My boys here in the house have run off and left me. I can't raise the gangs by phone, I can't raise the cops. I can't get answers or help from anybody. And there is fighting in the streets—listen!"

Swiftly he was on his feet. He crossed the room and touched a hidden stud. A section of the wall faded and glowed into a screen.

The walkway outside Doreleyo's house took shape bright under the lights and the distant glow of the night sky. It was deserted but off in the distance, hidden by other buildings, came sporadic flashes, the sound of guns and shouting voices.

For a long moment she still did not understand. Doreleyo loomed tall against the street and buildings on the screen, like some titanic legendary figure. Then comprehension came with a rush.

"The revolution," she said. "What Thorpe was talking about."

"Yes, the revolution," said Doreleyo in low tones, talking as if to himself. "Jack Thorpe has done something—something—I wish I knew what. Why is it they won't come near me? Why do they fight? He turned abruptly, crossed the room and came back to her. "He told you what he was going to do. He knew. You know. Tell me, and once I know what I'm fighting I can change it all back. I promise you that."

A strange gladness was welling up inside Neya. She looked up at the Boss in triumph.

"I can't tell you," she answered. "Even if I knew I couldn't tell you because I didn't understand."

"Don't lie to me, woman—" Doreleyo's

voice rumbled in the empty room like thunder.

"I'm not lying," Neya sat up on the couch. "Jack talked but I didn't understand."

"But he told you!" cried Doreleyo. "If you heard it, I'll get it from you. I'll probe it out of you. Then—" laughing suddenly, he picked her up like a rag doll and carried her across the room to a chair beside his desk. She felt herself flung into it, and, as she gasped for breath from the impact, Doreleyo dipped behind the desk and came out with something that looked like an oversized grease gun ending in a tip from which two small needles projected.

Neya had never seen one of these instruments but she had heard of them. They were quite simple and drastically effective. If the needles were inserted into a person's skull at the right point an electrical charge effectively destroyed that section of the brain that stored the moral sense and the sense of personal identity. There were other effects, equally bad or worse. She felt herself pinned down by Doreleyo's broad hand, and the needle points on the tip of the probe came closer.

As they touched her scalp Neya screamed. There was the distant sound of footsteps running along the corridor outside the room. Then everything exploded.

VII

THE blackness cleared from before her eyes and she struggled upright to face a strange tableau. Doreleyo stood upright, half turned away from her, the probe, one needle badly bent, lying on the floor at his feet. And in the doorway, facing them both, the long barrel of a warp pistol glistening in his fist, was Jack.

"Well, Earthman," said Doreleyo. "I'm very glad to see you."

And indeed, he sounded as if he was. All the tension, all the wildness that Neya had seen in him since he had revived her, was gone. Neya, automatically wiping away the thin trickle of blood that had seeped down from the single needle puncture in her scalp, looked at the big Pioneer and understood. At last he was face to face with concrete reality, a situation he understood. A man with a gun

was something the Crime Boss had had experience with; something he knew how to handle.

"Stay away from him, Jack!" she cried in instinctive warning.

"You hurt, Neya?" Jack asked, without taking his eyes from the other man.

"No—"

"Then come over here."

Neya pushed herself to her feet, and, shakily circling the Pioneer out of arm's reach, walked across the room to a couch near Jack, where she once more allowed her shaking body to collapse into a seated position.

"Now," said Jack to Doreleyo. "The Folio."

"It's in my desk drawer," responded Doreleyo, half turning toward that article of furniture and reaching out his hand.

"Stand still!" ordered Jack. He came forward and around the opposite side of the desk, keeping his gun trained steadily on the giant. At a touch of his finger on the drawer button the drawer slid out. Jack removed the book and put it under his arm.

"Tell me one thing," said Doreleyo, as Jack shut the drawer again. "What did you do?"

"Nothing unusual," Jack smiled. "Nothing that wasn't possible back in the ancient days when all men were Earthmen."

"Tell me," said Doreleyo. His voice was calm and interested. "I'd like to know."

"I used old skills," said Jack. "Skills you Pioneers have forgotten or discarded, but which were an instinctive part of the highly concentrated training all we of Earth must take nowadays. My weapons were invisible to your society, much as a savage might smuggle a blowgun and poison dart safely past an electric eye set to detect the metal of latter-day weapons."

"Tell me," repeated Doreleyo.

"All right," said Jack. "I sold factory efficiency techniques out of ancient industrialized Earth to your custom builders. I attracted the attention of your seconds in commands and hypnotized them into adding myself to the list of things they feared. I made money and studied your city, people, classes, and society. In less than a year I determined that the essential elements of your society were that five principal powers

worked together to produce a stable situation. Briefly, if the City of Jark was to continue running smoothly, and you were to stay in power, the following seemed to be necessary: that the police back up the power of the Boss, the gangs of the underworld cooperate with the police if the small businessmen do too; the small businessmen are cooperative with the unions, provided, that is, that if the financiers help the small businessmen, the unions do so too; the gangs cooperate with the police if the police remain loyal to the boss; and the small businessmen help the unions if the financier group help the small businessmen."

Doreleyo's eyes were baffled and furious. The love-bird fluttered unheeding on his shoulder, singing to him.

"I discovered something more," Jack went on softly. "I checked back some years into the City's history and I discovered that this tangle of power was mainly your doing. You had risen to power here in Jark as others have done in other Pioneer cities by playing one group against each other. It is a good scheme but it has one weakness, invariably, and that is that it depends on the kingpin for stability. I set myself to find the single point upon which the kingpin rested."

He smiled.

"One more of the old skills that has been largely forgotten is something called symbolic logic," he said. "Nowadays the situations that benefitted from its use have largely disappeared and only a few pedants on your Pioneer worlds bother to know it. Machines do, in some ways, too much for you. With us on Earth it is different. With symbolic logic, Doreleyo, your carefully built up maze of power resolves to this equation—" and, reaching out to the desk with his free hand, Jack picked up a stylus and pressed upon a sheet of plastic a row of symbols. He twirled the sheet around and showed it to Doreleyo.

"From which—" he continued, "by a simple transformation we get this—"

Twirling the sheet back, he once more set down a set of symbols and showed them to the Boss.

"I won't go into details," he said. "It's enough for you to know that from this it's apparent that P or G are the only elements truly essential to stability, the rest being ir-

relevant when logically analyzed. P stands for the support which the police give the boss, which is the thing I was trying to destroy, by creating an unstable situation. So I hit at G, which stands for the cooperation of the Gangs with the police. If the police begin to fear that the gangs will not cooperate with them, then they are not likely to lend any support to the titular chief of the gangs."

Doreleyo's face looked like a stone image. He spoke between his teeth.

"I had the cops in my pocket," he said.

"You did," said Jack, "as long as they were sure that you controlled the gangs. Make them uncertain who is really in control and they will refuse to stand by anybody until they know for sure. With the hypnotic entree I had into the minds of your district leaders it wasn't hard to inflame their hates against each other to violence when the time was ripe."

He stopped speaking. Through the silence of the room drifted the distant mob sounds from the screen.

"LOOK OUT, JACK!" screamed Neya.

During the time that Jack had been talking, Doreleyo, with a silence and delicacy of movement incredible in a man his bulk, had gradually been drawing closer to the speaker. Now, as Jack finished, he launched his three hundred pounds at the Earthman.

If it had not been for the Folio, Jack might have eluded him. But Jack hesitated for just a second, pushing the Folio across the desk to safety. In that moment Doreleyo's hand closed about the warp gun and its thin plastic barrel snapped like a straw under the pressure of the thick fingers. For a split second it looked as if Jack also would be overwhelmed, but he slipped backward across the desk and landed on his feet.

"Jack—" Neya moaned.

Jack was breathing somewhat hard, but his face was calm, even interested, as he faced the Boss. He spoke to the girl without turning his head.

"It's all right," he said. He made a sudden quick movement towards the Folio but Doreleyo's hand was there before him. The giant Pioneer swept it off the table to the floor. His eyes were red with hate.

"Now, Earthman!" he rumbled.

Neya ran to the door of the room and flung it open.

"This way, Jack!" she cried. "RUN!"

"He has the book," said Jack tensely. And, slowly, incredibly, he began to move around the table toward Doreleyo. Doreleyo moved to meet him.

With a sudden movement, the Pioneer charged. What happened then was simplicity itself, but to both Doreleyo and the watching Neya it seemed magical. As the Boss' outstretched hand reached Jack, he seized it in both of his own, and, turning swiftly, levered the larger man into the air and over on his back. As Doreleyo slammed to the floor, Jack rose into the air, turning like a cat and came down on the Pioneer with all his weight, driving his knee into the man's solar plexus. The air thudded out of Doreleyo's lungs, and he flopped back, limp.

Jack scooped up the Folio. Then he turned to Neya, smiling a little at the shock on her face.

"Judo," he told her. "More tricks—as Doreleyo would say. Now that I've got the book we can leave." She stared at him.

"So it was the book, after all," she said.

"I tried to tell you that," he answered gently. She shook her head bewilderedly.

"I should have guessed—" she began. Her face contorted suddenly and she screamed, "Jack—BEHIND YOU!"

Jack tossed the book to her and started to whirl, only to feel a heavy body crash into him from behind and forearms like logs come thudding across his chest, imprisoning him, crushing his arms to his sides. Doreleyo's hot breath hissed in his ear.

"Now!" grunted the giant.

His arms tightened. Jack lifted his heel and brought it down hard on Doreleyo's instep. The big man grunted and his arms relaxed. As his left arm came free Jack slipped beneath it and struck backward with the edge of his hand at the base of the giant's spine. The thud of the blow covered the sharp crack as the spine broke. Doreleyo's legs gave way beneath him.

But in going down he managed to fasten his hands about Jack's neck. He dragged the lighter man down with him, throwing the weight of his body across Jack's legs and lower trunk. Like a huge bulldog, ignoring the dead weight of the paralyzed

lower half of his body, Doreleyo gripped Jack's throat in his two huge hands and hung on, death staring in his eyes.

Jack's body and one arm were pinned to the floor. He fastened the fingers of his free hand at a sensitive point on Doreleyo's upper arm and squeezed. But the Pioneer was oblivious to anything except his determination to kill. His face writhed with the pain from the nerve pinch, but he held on.

Jack's sight was glazing; and he could feel his strength going from him. The man holding him had crossed the borderline that divides the sane from the insane. With a fleeting impulse of regret and disgust, Jack raised the edge of his free hand and struck one quick blow on the thick neck.

Doreleyo's neck broke. He slumped limply, his hands relaxing from Jack's throat. Lungs gulping greedily for air, Jack struggled free and pulled himself to his feet. He crossed over to where the Folio lay and picked it up. He turned to Neya.

"Let's go," he said.

They went. The love bird hung crying on beating wings above the dead body of Doreleyo. For a long minute it hung there. Then, with a tiny scream of agony, it flung itself head on at one of the flickering walls, smashed there, and dropped to the floor, a pitiful lump of scarlet feathers.

JACK led Neya at a run to the traffic tunnels. A rented car was waiting there, low and sleek under the overhead lights. But a huge thug, warp pistol holstered at his side and with the blades of his ring knives full-extended on bloody fists, was trying to force the locked controls.

Jack seemed to fly through the air at him. Their fighting bodies locked and toppled over the low hood of the car to fall from sight beyond. There was a long, drawn-out worrying noise and Jack rose to his feet alone, holding the warp pistol.

"Quickly," he snapped, vaulting into the car and holding a door in the cockpit open for her. "There's green blood on him. The aliens will be loose."

Neya's eyes widened. Pioneer born and bred, she knew only too well what happened in a city where the rioting spread to the foreign quarter. She jumped into the car. Jack snapped the transparent, warp-proof

top down and the car shot forward.

Three times they detoured to avoid struggling groups. Twice Jack had to take to the air, a suicidal maneuver under the low ceiling of the tunnels, when there was no other way of avoiding battle. And once he shot his way through a group of barrel-chested Sagittarians, killing cleanly and without mercy, for the squat humanoids were mad with the taste of blood and could be passed no other way. Then they burst forth onto the surface at the edge of the city; and Neya gasped at what she saw.

"The spaceport!" she cried, recognizing their destination.

The city behind them was red with flames. Jack flicked back the top and pushed her from the car.

"We're in time," he cried, above a mounting, thunderous rumble that came from within the spaceport gates, where a titanic shape loomed upright against the smoky night sky. "The ship for Earth is still warming up. Come on!"

He seized her wrist and dragged her after him. Numbly, she allowed herself to be pulled through the gate where a Platoon of Interstellar Guards stood at ready with a warp cannon pointing its ominous snout along the way to the blazing city. Only the two tickets in Jack's hand got them through.

Then they were inside the gates. Neya allowed herself to be hurried along for a dozen paces toward the great spaceship. Then she dug in her heels and stopped.

Jack whirled on her.

"What's wrong?" he shouted over the thunderous noise of the reactors warming up. "Come on, we've just time to make it."

"I'm not going," said Neya. Her face was white. He gripped her fiercely by the arms.

"Why not?" he shouted.

Tears were rolling down her cheeks. She shook her head.

"It's all right," she said. "I made you promise to take me. You don't have to. You go ahead."

"What are you talking about?" raved Jack. Above both of their heads, the great floating spaceport clock ticked off the seconds toward launching time.

"I made you promise—"

"What of it!" Jack shouted. "What's that got to do with it? I want you to come, you

little fool." He stared at her in the lurid light of the burning city.

"I love you!" he cried.

Neya's eyes went wide with shock. She swayed toward him and for a moment he caught her. Then she was fighting like a demoncat, pulling herself free. Astonished, he let her go.

"No!" her voice was determined. "That doesn't help. That makes it worse. I wouldn't fit in back there. I haven't been trained. I'd be helpless. No use to you. Jack! Go on—quickly. Go alone!"

He grabbed her in exasperation.

"You can be trained!" he bellowed above the mounting sound. "In six months—a year—you'll be just as good as I am."

She smiled sadly, her white face resigned.

"You think I haven't realized?" she cried.

"You're no ordinary Earthman. They don't send ordinary men half way across the galaxy to do the job you did. You aren't just any man back there. I know I could never come up to you, no matter what I did. And you know it too. Tell me the truth. Tell me what you really are back there on that world where everybody seems to be a superman!"

For a long second he stood staring at her, a look of incredulity spreading over his face. Then, with a sudden whoop of joy, he swept her up off her feet and started at a run for the gangplank of the ship.

"Put me down!" she screamed, kicking, but he paid no attention. In spite of the fact that she weighed over two-thirds his own weight, he ran lightly and easily as if she was no burden at all. Pressed tight against him, Neya felt his chest shake slightly as if he was silently laughing.

He reached the gangplank and was up it in three bounds. For a second the port loomed, then they were inside and the great plug of metal swung shut behind them. And the floor pressed up against their feet as the ship began to lift.

"What's this?" demanded a spruce young deck officer sharply. He stood, very stiff and erect in his white and gold uniform, looking at them as if he doubted their sanity.

"Nothing," said Jack, setting Neya down. "It's all right. We've got tickets." And he produced them.

"Cabin four thirty-six to the right," said

the officer, glancing at them. "All right." He swung abruptly on his heel and was off down the corridor, snapping out commands to a couple of crewmen who were reeling in the gangplank.

Jack and Neya moved off down the corridor to the right until they came to a door where 436 glowed whitely against the imitation paneling. Jack pressed a ticket against the scanner and the door swung open. He took Neya by the hand and drew her through into a small stateroom, cleverly furnished to give an illusion of size and great comfort. Green carpeting was beneath their feet and soft lights glowed overhead. The silence after the thunder was almost shocking.

They faced each other.

"You won't get away with this," said Neya. "I'll talk to the Captain." He ignored the threat.

"So you thought I was something unusual," he said. The smile that had been on his face ever since her demand outside to know who he really was, was broadening.

"I suppose you'll try to tell me you aren't," she replied, coldly.

"Not only that—" he said. He was openly grinning at her now in pure delight. "I'm not only very ordinary. I'm worse than that. I'm very blundering and inept. So you want to know who I am?"

Neya's face was hard and unfriendly. Jack took both her hands in his.

"Young lady," he spoke the words with great emphasis, jerking his thumb toward his chest, but without letting go of her hand, "I—I—am the incredibly stupid and woolly-headed librarian who made the original mistake and sent the Folio to Doreleyo in the first place!"

For a second she just stared at him, and then her face began to crumple. Jack let go of her arms and pulled her to him. She sobbed on his shoulder.

"I'm no good," she said in a choked voice, after a moment, moving her lips against the soft cloth of his tunic. "I'll never be any good no matter how much they train me. When you find that out, you won't like me. So I'll just go away and not bother you any more."

"The hell you will!" said Jack, grimly, tightening his arms around her.



THE ETHIC OF THE ASSASSIN

By HAYDEN HOWARD

Incorruptible, The Assassin. The best you could do was to buy the delicate Kri-Kri death.

THE monotonous cry of the kri-kri hushed with a clap of silence that snapped the young doctor upright in bed. Konrad had stolen his lovely wife. Was it a dream? His hand moved to find Kit's smooth, gently slumbering back. He smiled, already fuddled as to what had awakened him, and settled back comfortably again, stroking his hand along the curve of her body with a certain sleepy pride.

Three months, he thought, and Kit would bear him their first child, a pioneer five light-years from the ancestral home of his protoplasm. I wonder if he will take as long to settle down as I did?

I wonder what's the matter with the kri-kri?

As his eyes widened to note the cluster of seventeen small moons whirling past the window he heard the sputtering flight of the skar.

Quickly he faced the explosion of moonlight that silhouetted the kri-kri's cage against the window screen.

Taen said it isn't strong enough, he thought, fumbling for the light switch, then thinking better of it. The light might attract the skar.

Louder than the ventilators atop the transparent dome of the city rose the staccato airblasting of the skar. With a haunting shriek, it collided with its long, wingless



shadow against the window screen. A twang, the glint of a spear quivering in the wire. A hiss and a rustle and it was gone.

By the time it struck again, Jeff had lifted the amulet Taen gave him from the night table. As he squeezed the release button, he could feel the angry vibration of the minute warrior within. A mosquito-like whine faded after a red fleck of light no larger than the eye of an insect. Like a tiny meteor, the prisoner of the amulet flashed across the mirror and quenched within the skar.

The long airsquid stuttered and blundered against the laughing mask with a crackle of its exoskeleton. As it tumbled out of sight behind the foot of the bed, Jeff slid his feet to the rug and fished for his slipper. He was in time to catch the skar slithering weakly across the rug, pumping air like a man with a crushed chest. It popped when he hit it with his slipper. Bending, white-muscled, across the moonlight, he searched for his minute defender. But its light had gone out. What he did see was the ugly gleam of man-made poison on the heel of the skar.

"Konrad, no, please," Kit's little-girl voice called from her sleep. Then she breathed regularly again.

The young doctor gritted his teeth as he closed the window and cautiously fished his pajamas from beneath the bed covers.

TIP-TOEING down the cold tile hallway, buttoning up against the cold breath of the dome ventilators with his left hand while he gripped the skar with the strong, surgeon's fingers of his right, he looked more like a tousled-headed boy than a doctor, until a year ago chief surgeon on an intergalactic liner.

Quiet as he was, Taen's huge, fierce eyes met his around the varicose-veined marble pillar in the vestibule.

"Poisoned, sire," Taen's harsh voice contained more statement than question as he hopped forward, three-jointed legs still folded in his servile stance, for erect he would have stood even taller than Jeff, and rising from one's customary place indoors, according to Taen, was unthinkable. At Jeff's suggestions that he stand, he would wave his white, prosthetic hands in horror. It was not in accord with "the unwritten laws."

"Sire, see the three-circle brand on its thorax. And listen: it is said The Assassin has repurchased the necklace of his profession from the moneylenders. A very broad-shouldered Earthman masked in brass climbed the long path to The Assassin's crags two nights ago. No doubt he purchased your wife's life, enabling The Assassin to reclaim his necklace."

Jeff leaned wearily against the pillar. "Konrad."

Taen raised his kauri on its perch-staff in assent. "No doubt he retained clothing that had touched her body and with that The Assassin was able to train the skar." Taen whipped the hood from the kauri and it clattered its beak and hummed its incredibly small wings. "Are we in turn to purchase the death of Konrad?"

"No."

With the mismatched hands the doctor had fitted him from the Body Bank, Taen unsheathed his kauri's spurs. A year before, when Jeff found this mountain man lying with bleeding wrist stumps in the jungle he readily admitted he had killed without hiring The Assassin. Caught, he had been maimed and left to die in the jungle. Since only The Assassin could directly take life, since he was too expensive to be hired to execute any but the most aristocratic murderers, Taen had been merely maimed and deserted. Against his protests of the unthinkable of it, the young doctor had saved his life and given him arms.

Taen rasped, "Then The Assassin shall not profit from my master. Though I again shatter tradition, though Konrad is Manager of the City and guarded by walking machines and ones of my people who love the imitation of power, I will do the job myself if you so wish, sire."

"You misunderstand," Jeff replied. "I would buy Konrad's life in the customary way if it would give me back my wife's. But while he lives there is a chance he will relent and leave us in peace."

"Peace is gone, sire. The bargain has been made. The honor of the countless generations of his clan demands The Assassin do his job. It has always been so. For him to fail or to accept a bribe is unthinkable. Only the purchasing party, Konrad, could cancel the agreement."

"You can't visualize Konrad doing that, can you."

Sire, it is said that in this last year he has become a mad man of steel and poison."

The young doctor shook his head. His voice rushed out, a pressure leak of his tension. "No Taen, he was always that way. But before he lost Kit he felt safe. He felt he owned us both. He felt he owned the power of the city, and, since few clashed with his managerial decisions, for they were usually wise ones, this illusion grew in him until he felt like a god holding the world in the palm of his hand. Kit's loss is a blow at everything he thinks he holds. Now he strikes back desperately at Kit and me, at anything that threatens his power."

Jeff fumbled in his pajama pocket for his cigarettes, but they weren't there. "What can I do? He has always been set to go that way. I saw his inability to take the loss of anything, the way he identifies even small possessions with the core of himself. When I first accompanied him into the jungle to hunt suri," Jeff smiled grimly, "he lost his wrist watch, a very ordinary wrist watch, but he made us camp two days while we looked for it. He drove those beaters like animals. We had exhausted our supply of tablets for purifying the water of the jungle puddles, but, no matter, we must find his watch. He had won it in some sort of athletic contest in his youth. Although he began to blister with the fever, that fool wouldn't go to his hammock. He could hardly stand, but he kept thrashing the bushes, looking for his watch. He shouted and raved and finally tried to shoot some of the beaters. We stayed until we found his watch."

TAEN shifted uneasily. "Your wife is safe until the spies of The Assassin report they see her alive, that the skar failed. Skars are expensive. He won't send another till then. We have at least until morning to do the only thing we can do, to go to him, to give him presents and please him with us so that he will rub the most expensive poison on the beak of the next skar and let your wife die as painlessly as possible."

Jeff flashed Taen a look of utter hatred. With a curse he smashed the skar against the pillar. Then he swung his fist against it with a grunt of pain, again, as though

he would smash the inevitable.

"Don't punish yourself, sire. It is Konrad who must suffer."

Kit ran down the hallway to them with her hair streaming across her sleep-swollen face and her negligee clutched tight across her swelling bosom. She threw her arms about Jeff.

His face must have been very strange, for she said, "Jeff, have I done something? You wanted a baby, you said you did."

Wearily he stroked her brow. "I'm all right. Nightmare. Walking in my sleep."

Taen nodded eager assent, then stalked off as he always did in the face of sentimentality.

"Smile, Kit. I dreamt I was defending you—and our son. Of course I want a son. What gives you such funny ideas?"

She sniffed and rubbed her cheek against his chest. "I don't know. Sometimes when I start thinking of all the planets you've seen, the strange and wonderful people, the monsters and kings you've healed, I get frightened. This one planet—and I—won't be enough to hold you. I'll wake up some morning and where your head should rest I'll find a dent in the pillow. I'll hear the rockets blast off and you'll be gone wandering among the stars the way Konrad said you would."

He stiffened at Konrad's name. But she rushed on: "He used to call you The Wanderer, you know." Then she smiled at him. "I think wanderers are afraid of babies, just like seafaring men in story books were afraid of reefs and mudbanks."

Jeff managed a smile. "You're wrong, dimple cheeks, babies aren't mudbanks, they're anchors. Sure they're troublesome. You have to lug them around, hoist them up and down, clean off the rust. But without an anchor in a storm, a ship, a man and a woman, will go on the rocks."

"Taen?" Jeff called. Hawklike eyes appeared around the pillar. "Would you ask Garth to come sit with Kit?"

"You going someplace at this time of night." Then she inhaled with a great gasp of breath as she noticed the crushed skar. "Konrad!"

"Very unlikely. He's probably more interested in bossing the city than in carrying out any crazy threats he once made. This

airsquid undoubtedly blundered through the dome ventilators. It's a wild one. Now you go back to bed while Taen and I go raise a fuss with the Security Guards."

"Couldn't you use the telephone?" Quickly she cupped her palm over his lips. "Don't answer that if you don't want to, Doctor Jeff," she laughed. "Keep your secrets. I'm not like—like Konrad." Her voice trailed away.

As Jeff watched her hurrying back down the hall, he felt as though he could close his hands on something solid again. He didn't have a plan yet, but he had a plan for determining one. It was poker, it was play-by-ear, it was the exploratory operation. No one was going to kill his wife.

"Garth," he whirled at the ponderous jungle man. "Get the gas gun out of my gun rack. Taen, give him an amulet with an extra lively skar-killer. Here, I'm writing a note to Kit, Garth. If she should wake up before I get back and want to go outside, give it to her. It will explain why she mustn't. It will explain what I've got to do."

Jeff dressed in his study, slung his sten gun and, pressing the signal-emitter in his pocket, opened the spike-topped gate characteristic of all the great houses of the dome city. They stepped echoingly along the sidewalk.

"Sire," Taen's voice hissed. His face was searching the shadows. "I wouldn't take that sten gun. It would give The Assassin the fear to kill you. The excuse too, if your life has been purchased. If you are unarmed while you are on his territory it would be hardly honorable to kill you. And he may believe you have come to purchase the life of Konrad or to pay a smaller sum to assure that the inevitable death of your wife will be a painless one."

"My intentions are different," Jeff retorted, but at the corner he threw the gun over the wall into his garden.

Taen crowhopped behind, still in his shortlegged stance.

"**B**UT sire, to purchase the life of Konrad and a painless end for your wife is the way these things are done. Where could you hide her? There is no rocket leaving this planet for two months, and even in the

jungle The Assassin's followers would find her."

Jeff did not reply as they rode the all-night street escalator up the hilly side of the city past the steep-roofed granite houses of the wealthier mountain men, constructed centuries before the city was domed over, past the flat-roofed, functional houses of the Earthmen who cared nothing for the traditional architecture, all for comfort.

"Sire, Konrad's house is still alight."

A waltz tune rose above the drone of the ventilators.

"He's having a party, sire. We could go back for the guns. We may never have another chance like this."

"No. While he lives there is still hope for Kit."

"But such a man does not relent."

"We shall see. But first I want to try to learn The Assassin's thoughts. Perhaps Taen, there are certain conditions under which he does not operate entirely by custom that you do not know about."

"He is incorruptible, sire."

"Sometimes a man's price is not wholly monetary." Jeff fitted on his respirator, then inserted their pass cards into the mouth slot of the automatic gate guard. The rush of wind as the gate of the city swung outward swept them into the ammoniated world of jungles and mountains. A dozen jetcopter drivers rushed at them, jabbering, tugging at their arms. But Taen motioned as if to loose his kauri, rasping: "Back, sons of suri," then to Jeff: "To approach The Assassin afoot is more traditional."

The quick climb up the mountain made Jeff's breath whistle back and forth through his respirator. Below, the city was a glistening bubble, and below it the alien jungle was soft black fur, its lakes and rivers mirrors for The Dancers.

"Sire," Taen fairly screamed with exhilaration. "This clean air sweeps the thick oxygen from my lungs. My soul awakes. Anything is possible."

Hitching up to full height, he raced ahead like a great ground bird and with a challenging war screech hurled his kauri from its perch stick toward the crags of The Assassin, bulbous and black, close-packed like a herd of great bulls upon the field of the Milky Way, a long climb, a high flight

for skar or kauri.

The bird arched back in the windmoan, hissed over their heads, plunging toward the dome of the city.

"Sire, she stoops. A mountain man!" Taen shrilled his recall whistle frantically as the kauri pursued and struck repeatedly at a leaping, dodging shadow that silhouetted smaller and smaller against the dome in its pell-mell retreat toward the gate. Finally the bird soared up and back like a dark meteor across the stars and glided with a smack onto her perch.

"The Assassin's spy?"

"Or Konrad's, sire. A pity I called her off without thinking. We could have searched the body and learned whose."

II

THE Assassin's outguards picked them up long before they reached the crags. Jeff could see nothing. But the rattle of pebbles, the rumble of dislodged boulders from so many directions was not encouraging. The Assassin had quite an army.

The crag tops winked yellow, flashlight eyes as Taen led the young doctor up a narrow, rock-overhung trail to a moss-bearded hole where an old mountain man motioned them inside with his spear.

Taen forestalled Jeff's question: "Yes sire, it is hardly what one would expect. You see, The Assassin's palace was magicked to sand and steam by the weapons of the first of your comrades to land upon this planet. They did not understand—they never have understood—that The Assassin's person is inviolate. They have blown away his prestige with their own mightier weapons. Every man can now be his own assassin, they say, or at least so my people have understood. Many of The Assassin's followers have joined your Security Guards. Many of his wealthiest clients now deal through them. So he is forced to haggle over the prices of his victims like a common tradesman, not in his mighty castle but in a poor cave." He pointed down the taper-lit passageway that stretched ahead of them.

"But be sure not to offer a bribe for your wife's life, sire. The Assassin will never come to that."

The monster bowed low and his tuber-

culed face smiled without intelligence as his charred, fingerless paw pointed their way into the labyrinth.

"That was Garnak," whispered Taen. "Sire, the ancestors of The Assassin netted him in the swamps. For generations he was their chief agent of death for those who could not afford a skar; a quick-moving creature with the understanding of a man, they trained him to kill without a sound. He was The Assassin's most prized possession. But the great mushroom of fire and dust your people made rise from The City of Three Spears scorched all the worth from Garnak. The Assassin beat his own head against the altar when they brought back the Garnak that you saw."

A glowing green man stepped from a side passage, and Taen gasped, pointing an unsteady finger at the apparition. But as the green man approached, Jeff realized Taen was not impressed by his luminescence, which was probably the result of a recent bath in a cave pool containing one of the species of phosphorescent algae for which the planet was noted. The mountain man was pointing at his hands, or rather his lack of them. Like Taen, this man had undergone the "treatment" for murder and survived. He was joined by another, a handsome young man convicted of some minor crime, without ears.

"The Assassin awaits, Doctor," said the green man.

"Here, light up a torch for the gentleman, Astro," said the earless one with a voice of minor authority. Turning to Jeff: "Would you care to leave your servant here?"

"My advisor," corrected the young doctor. "Of course he will accompany me."

Carrying the sputtering torch in a mount upon his head, the green man lighted their way toward a water-stained archway that cast faint shadows in their direction from lights within. They walked slowly, for the path was deeply eroded by cave drip.

"Taen," Jeff whispered, "Are all of his followers like that? It seems to me the old man at the entrance had a bent back—there was something wrong with him too."

"No doubt, sire. The Assassin has recently come to favor those who are not whole. They have greater loyalty, for there is no place else they could earn food, and there is an-

other reason he likes their company which you shall soon see."

"Don't they know about the Training House for the Handicapped that we have opened?"

"Perhaps they have heard of it, sire, but what matter. They will have starved long before the waiting line moves up for them." His voice trailed off as they entered the flickering chamber of The Assassin.

A glint of silver shimmered into a face. A pool of blood lumped into a red silken pillow. Between the two was brown, wrinkled flesh, old, etched in shadow, backed by candles and shapeless watchers with bright spears, mirrors with spider-cracked glass, and further back, dark holes, the nesting holes of skar.

Jeff's eyes refocused on The Assassin. The face was a mask, that of a newly-made, ruggedly handsome robot. The mouth was a cupid's bow smile. But the flesh of the torso was real. The ribs pushed against it and rearranged the shadows as The Assassin breathed. The arms stretched from it in an open-handed welcome.

Taen bowed low and Jeff followed his example.

"**B**E SEATED, reputed healer," croaked the voice of a very old man. "The other may go."

It was not until then, as he tried to find a clue to action, that Jeff noticed the mask had dents, no eyeholes.

"My advisor is inseparable to me, great one," the young doctor replied carefully. "At your pleasure, he will seat himself at my left hand." He wondered if this was too bold a reply.

Indeed, the careless young man stepped quickly from the shadows, poising a skar at shoulder height.

But The Assassin's mask turned with the pulsing of the airsquid. His voice rasped with such painful effort that the doctor in Jeff tentatively listed it as a symptom of cancer of the larynx: "Whoever you are, return my weapon to its cote. If the doctor so wishes, his advisor may remain." His mask stared straight ahead once more. "You have come to purchase the life of Konrad. Good. If I were not The Assassin, with an ethic more rigid than man's, I would have

ended him myself, for it is said that he is the Earthman who ordered death to the City of Three Spears."

Jeff glanced at Taen and the mountain man nodded significantly, stroking his prosthetic hands together as if counting out money. The shadows leaned forward eagerly.

"No," Jeff's voice exploded. "I want only the return of Kit's life. Of course I do not ask you to consider anything unethical," he added with more care. "I want to learn from your own lips if there are any legitimate steps I can take to have her restored to me."

"Konrad purchased a life," croaked the voice behind the mask. "Thirty thousand credits made me the instrument of the contract, a traditional one, no side alleys or higher offers. Now only the purchaser may cancel, and will forfeit a third of his purchase price in doing so. For that you must see him."

"It is as I feared," Jeff replied slowly while a germ of a plan propagated in his mind. "All now rests with your skars. I have said I do not wish the life of Konrad. I could easily afford it. But I am a healer and, like you, have responsibilities greater than those of a common man. My purpose is to save life, just as yours is to serve others in its removal. I do not stoop to personal revenge, just as you have not. I will trouble you no more with my personal affairs."

"That is right," replied The Assassin. "You recognize that I am disadvantaged among men. I am a symbol, an institution. For my hereditary self to exact revenge for my personal self would be unthinkable. It would destroy the impartial death symbol for which I stand, for which my clan has stood for generations. Although Garnak was ruined by him and other insults as well have been inflicted on me by Konrad and his followers, like you, I cannot stoop to personal revenge."

"It is good to hear such wisdom in these law-smashing days," Jeff replied, as Taen raised his eyes in disgust toward the vague ceiling.

"Prince of Assassins," Jeff continued. "We will now speak as kindred minds, not buyers and sellers of life. Although as a doctor I can see your life is flickering out,

as a friend, I feel what you feel, that to see again, to open one's eyes to the flame of the sunset, the strength of the black crags, would be the pinnacle of life."

The mask nodded quickly.

Jeff continued, his mind eyeing his plan from many angles, "I am a healer. Apart from desire for my wife's life, without obligation, I offer you sight."

The Assassin's fingers rose trembling to his mask.

"This is not a bribe?"

"It is not a bribe unless you accept it in that spirit?"

"I had not realized an Earthman would help a mountain man."

"Let your attendants tell you of my advisor's hands."

As the earless one spoke quickly in The Assassin's ear, the old man's hands struggled clumsily with the straps of his mask. When the equally nervous fingers of the earless young man replaced them, The Assassin croaked breathlessly: "If you can give me sight and your advisor hands, perhaps you will return the arms and legs, the eyes and ears of my followers. Since you are by no means a wealthy man, we will contrive to pay you for your work."

As his hands rose to the heavy circle of gold about his neck, the mask clattered across them to the floor.

Shock of horror stiffened Jeff's face. He had expected the external eye processes to be atrophied but hardly the great, scar-blackened holes that stared at him. It would be a wonder if there was any optic nerve left to tie into. Even the optic chiasma might be dead. This extreme degeneration might extend all the way to the frontal lobe of the brain.

"Let us begin your magic at once," croaked The Assassin, his death-pale face acrease with hope.

"This is not magic to be worked with the wave of a hand," Jeff replied. "It is a series of delicate operations done in quick succession: one to clear away dead tissue and see exactly what repairs need be made; a second to prepare surviving afferent and efferent nerve paths and the necessary artery and eye-muscle attachments; the third, extremely difficult, to plant the eye, to make the nerve, vein and muscle connections.

These electrolytic, hormone-catalyst splices are so minute I will have to do most of the work under at least fifty power magnification."

"Then let us begin at once. There is little time."

Jeff wondered what the old man meant by that. His time? Whose time?

"As you say. My advisor and I go now to select eyes from the Body Bank. Your spies can no doubt lead you to my house. The consulting room opens on Harspa Way."

When the Earthman rose to go, a thin voice spoke from the shadows: "If this should be your idea of revenge. If our master should die upon your operating table, your end, and that of your wife, will be particularly unpleasant."

"That one is next in line when I am finished," croaked The Assassin.

Although he strained to see among the dancing shadows Jeff could not make out that one's face.

III

DAWN turned the great dome a delicate pink, but the chilled layer of smog within gave the jagged forms of the city a bluish cast. Cold, distorted roofs swept past them as the street escalator bore them down the interior hill. A tiny figure walked with bowed head beside a glint of water in the gray courtyard behind a kidney shaped roof.

"Look sire, it is Konrad. Perhaps he cannot sleep because he knows death is at his shoulder too. From here I could loose my kauri and before the guards awake—"

"No. I'm going to speak with him."

"But sire, if you enter his garden that would give him an excuse to kill you for trespass."

"He wouldn't risk the unfavorable publicity. That is why he is dealing through The Assassin."

When they reached the fog-snaked street that led to Konrad's, Taen found his voice in a rush of complaints. He even forgot to say, "sire."

"You are doing this all wrong. Treating The Assassin is craziness. What will it do except bring your death if you fail? Your wife is already doomed. The Assassin's bargain is made. And Konrad, he won't speak

with you. He'll order his machines to shoot you. Go home and be with your wife while there is time."

But Jeff reached for the iron handle. Konrad's door swung in, as an electric eye buzzed in the wall, revealing a small metal-lined vestibule with slots in its low ceiling, for gunfire or for gas. A recorded voice rasped: "The master is not at home."

"I wish to see Konrad," Jeff shouted in a loud clear voice that set hidden mechanisms buzzing frantically.

As they droned into silence, Konrad's face, appearing drawn and strangely aged, flashed on the visa-screen.

"Go away Jeff, or I shall call the Security Guards."

"Why don't you kill me, not Kit," Jeff shouted.

At this Konrad's eyes opened huge and bright. Then they squinted again and a tiny smile rippled across his lips. "I don't know what your talking about."

The screen blanked out and the stinging odor of chlorine began to flood the vestibule, a hint to depart, for the door was still open.

Not until they reached the spiked gate of the doctor's bouse did either speak.

"Sire, in my helpless anger I underestimated your wisdom. Now I see that giving The Assassin sight, if you succeed, will surely cause him to give your wife a most painless death in his gratitude, and of course he will withhold his skars until the operation is—Look sire," Taen interrupted himself, "that man at the corner, he turns his face away, Konrad's spy. Shall I—"

But Jeff was gone to find his wife.

As he held her tightly so she would not see his face he told her the truth; she had the note in her hand; she had guessed it anyway, what little she had not already known. But she didn't begin to cry until he came to the eye operation.

"Don't do that, Jeff. Since I've known you you've never done any complicated eye operations. Even the man with the ripped cornea, you sent him on the rocket back to Earth. If that murderer doesn't see, he'll kill you too. You've got so much to live for."

"Not without you, dimples. Show me your smile. That's doctor's orders. There, that's the way." Jeff forced a grin across his face. "Your hubby's subtler than he looks.

Taen's underestimated me and so have you. I may not have performed this operation, but when I was an intern at Johns Hopkins I witnessed several. We'll give The Assassin sight, but by a somewhat roundabout method with rather surprising consequences. Your hubby may look dumb, but he can think more than a couple of moves ahead."

"Taen," he called, then to Kit: "Now you take good care of that son of mine. We're going to have a lot of fun watching him grow into a man."

"Pardon me sire."

"Taen, have you anyone you can absolutely trust?"

"No sire."

"Garth?" The bulky jungle man who had been leaning quietly against the pillar nodded.

"Sire, I have a brother."

"Does he closely resemble you?"

"It is said, sire, that he does not."

"Good. Take 20,000 credits from the safe behind Kit's portrait and give them to him. Tell him that when The Assassin's party reaches my house he must go to the Body Bank and purchase all the eyes—I think there are eleven pair—all they have in stock. Now he must let it slip to the attendants while he waits for the eyes to be capsuled that he was sent by Konrad. And when he is outside again, he must go to the river, open the capsules and throw the eyes far out into the water."

"Sire!"

"Do you understand?"

"Yes sire."

"Taen, you will assist me as usual. I won't need you for this, Kit. Taen will be pretty enough for this patient. So you can catch up on your knitting. Right now I'm going to study up on the nervous systems of mountain men." As he pulled open one of the drawers of the capacious files in his study he called to Taen: "Sterilize and lay out the instruments as if we were going to do a Class 9 operation. I'll add anything else I'll need later."

When he came out to look for his cigarettes he saw Garth. Jeff's Adam's apple jerked nervously as he addressed Garth for there was frighteningly little written about the brain structures of mountain men. What there was indicated major physiological dif-

ferences from Earthmen. "Garth; take your gas gun and go help Kit with her knitting. If you should hear the mountain men killing us, sneak her out her bedroom window onto the side street. She'll be completely in your care."

Taen blurted: "You could give him sight if you had the eyes from the Body Bank. Garth can't hide her very long at best. I don't understand sire."

"You will. Remember, we're playing this by ear. Things will open up as we go along. I want to see The Assassin's reaction before I decide exactly what will be your part in my next move."

"Even assuming you have a plan, sire, how will The Assassin get past the Security Guards to come here for the operation?"

"That's his worry," Jeff retorted curtly. "Fight his way, bribe his way. He knows what he's doing." Already the young doctor's fingers were stiffening. He was painfully conscious of the aches in his legs and back from the long climb. His head hummed. He needed sleep. Not so good for a delicate operation. He shrugged and went back to his reading.

WHEN The Assassin finally came, he came in style. Jeff heard the firing while the mountain men were still blocks away.

Bursting in, bristling with sten guns, bomb throwers, dripping-beaked skars, they carried the old man in their midst like a sack of tubi.

"The guard who is regularly stationed at the hill gate had been replaced by an idealist," the earless young man panted. "But the master has sent twenty men to the Coliseum to create a diversion that may give us a few hours."

"Even under the best conditions this operation takes six hours," Jeff exclaimed.

As Taen stripped off his filthy robes, The Assassin croaked: "It had better take much less. I have not that many men to throw away."

He snarled as Taen in his haste nicked his blue-veined skull with the razor. And he muttered with senile detachment as he was swabbed with K2X, sheeted and strapped down upon the table. His black eye cavities turned with suspicion, as though they could

see, when Jeff's damp hands squeaked into the rubber gloves.

"May the gods lean over your shoulder, sire," Taen whispered.

The two stepped into the glare of germicidal lamps, steel instruments, steel table, glinting knives of light, while the followers of the old man like dark crags lined the wall, a barrier to the door.

"Hypo."

The Assassin's breathing was as thunderous as the air blasting of a skar.

"Crank down the variable reflection viewer."

Desultory gunfire echoed through the dome city as Jeff focused the eyepiece until the scar tissue appeared like two black radishes extending into the gray blur of the forebrain. But when he increased the reflective depth the myelin covering of the optic chiasma glistened whitely. He exhaled with relief. There was still a gateway to the cerebrum.

The Assassin's breathing subsided to a gentle whisper.

"Scalpel."

While the gunshots rattled closer, Jeff cored into the dead tissue with the apparent unconcern of a boy cutting out the eye of a potato. But when he reached tissue of a pinkish tinge he moved with infinite caution.

The doctor was conscious of the huge cables of the efferent nerves that lay beneath his low-powered microscope and of the delicate two-fingered probe that moved among them, guided by control knobs rather than the coarse direct hand of man, testing, searching for life.

A sound so quick it eroded diseased tissue, yet did not harm the living cells, an ultra high frequency vibration that sand-blasted with the molecules of the air for sand, became his tool. It cleared the way where muscles would be soldered with quick-growing hormone and cell solutions. It brought neurons to the surface like the skeletons of dinosaurs and made them wince visibly beneath the microscope. It cut with inhuman precision for it was the extension of a semi-robot who saw with echoes and obeyed Jeff's hands only in the broad, general plan of the operation. It found live muscles and made their striated bodies

shorten and lengthen agonizingly like great slugs when it laid them bare. It did all the work in an area less than an inch square.

A copter roared low and someone near the wall dropped a sten gun with a hand-shaking clatter. Straightening quickly, Jeff blinked his eyes and swore at the world in general. Taen nudged his side, then wrote on a pad: "What do you intend to do for eyes?"

Jeff's paw sagged. Lost on his microscopic battleground he had forgotten primary considerations. It took him a moment to remember what they were.

"No eyes, yes. Eyes. Send the earless one to the Body Bank to get them."

"But Garth's brother has thrown them away . . ."

"Yes, but send for them anyway. The description and order are in my shirt pocket. Also my personal check. Get him started."

Long before the outer door clicked shut Jeff was lost in his microscopic universe, snipping veins and small arteries, lightly sealing them so they could be opened again.

IV

BY THE time the earless one returned, wide-eyed and breathless, Jeff had stepped away from the table for a cigarette. The Assassin was moaning gently in the short time of consciousness the young doctor had planned for him between rounds. It was important that the old man be conscious. To make sure, Jeff had given him a hypo of a far different action than the first.

"Gone," The Assassin echoed his follower's words.

As he struggled feebly against his straps, the earless one managed to gasp that an agent of Konrad's had bought them just a short time before, all eleven pair.

Jeff swore appropriately.

"Let him up," hissed the earless one, "You Earthmen are all in this together."

"Don't stand there, you fool," Jeff shouted theatrically. "Konrad is in this alone. He could not permit the power of an Assassin with sight. Go to him. Take back those eyes."

"Quickly," The Assassin echoed.

"But you must go too," Jeff exclaimed as he unfastened the old man from the table.

"Only you can lead them against such a one as Konrad. Taen, give me those bandages. Great Assassin, here I give you an injection to give you strength. And Taen will accompany you."

While his followers helped the old man into his robes, the young doctor drew Taen aside.

"Take a robe from one of these men so that you will not be recognized. You have said you understood these people, how to handle them. Now is your chance to show me, for our lives, yours included, depend on it. All you have to do is plant the proper suggestions in their minds. They will force you to do the rest." He handed Taen a satchel of surgical tools and a small tubular freezer, and he explained in detailed steps what he had in mind.

Finally Taen nodded, his eyes fierce with excitement. "I understand, sire. There are moments when men will agree to anything."

"Let him suggest it himself. Just plant the thought there."

Taen patted the satchel and followed the motley crowd of mountain men out into the morning.

Pacing the empty room, Jeff lit another cigarette, threw it away and lit another. Maybe he should have gone himself? But he would have been recognized. Then it would be the Security Guards—

"Somebody shot a hole in my wall," a small voice announced.

Jeff surprised himself with laughter. It seemed like everybody was out to get them.

"Shall I plug it with my finger, dimples?" She bluffed as if to spill the coffee on him.

"No sugar this time, sugar." He stepped quickly to the window and fitted his eye between the drawn curtains, but the siege apparently had turned into a pursuit of the mountain men for the street was empty except for a Security Guard curled in a pool that reflected the redness of the morning sun. The mountain men could take care of themselves, handicaps or no. They had better. His life and Kit's depended on it. It would be ironic if The Assassin were killed.

"What are you staring at?"

"Just ogling a jungle Venus." The strain of the operation had lifted with such sud-

deo relief that he could take nothing seriously. Even the thousand things that could go wrong did not weigh upon him as he sipped the scalding coffee. It was the moment between pains.

"I keyholed the operation even though Garth got angry. You were wonderful, hubby. At least I guess you were. But isn't that old murderer apt to die of shock."

"If he does that, and his men come back here, Garth will take you out of the window. But he's a tough old devil, have to be to last this long." He explained that Konrad had bought all the yes, cauterizing the lie with scalding coffee. His nerves were beginning to hum again. This was dirty business, he thought, as he watched her over the coffee cup, memorizing the tilt of her head, the gloss of her eyelids, the gentle S-curve of hair down her cheek with a little roll-over where it touched her shoulder; but nobody was going to hurt Kit.

He closed his eyes, saw her as he first saw her, bright with silk, twirling beneath the masks at the Festival Ball. But the man with broad shoulders who bent her back and whispered in her hair, then looked up for all the world to see his pride, was Konrad. Even after his threats, she had said very little against him. Perhaps she had a vaguely guilty feeling too. People were the way they were. Konrad was a prime example. When you pressed the proper buttoos they did what they were set to do. Could you blame such a man as Konrad? He shivered and prayed Kit would never learn what was happening to Konrad just then.

When the next rocket came in two months, they'd be on it. She'd be happier if she never knew.

"It's awfully quiet Jeff."

"Not for long."

THE ASSASSIN'S men returned to comparative silence. Bloodsoaked and weary, they filed in and laid the old man upon the table. Immediately, Jeff prepared another hypo, for The Assassin was white and shallow-breathing from shock. It would be better to postpone the last phase of the operation, but Taco was already opening the freezing cylinder to show him their success.

The earless man set a moist package on the floor beneath the table. "Guards fought

like women," he smiled. "We can keep them off till you're done."

Jeff looked around. Kit had already left the room. Quickly he stripped off the bandages as Taen raised his hands to the germicidal light, then moved rather clumsily to assist.

"What happened?" Jeff hissed from the corner of his mouth.

Taen failed to answer. Jeff cursed softly. Without knowing what had passed between Konrad and The Assassin, how was he to act?

With an unsteady hand that could ruin the operation, Taen jabbed the suction hose at the orbital cavity. As Jeff turned to him the mountain man fell heavily against the table, reeled back with an apologetic expression on his oddly pale face and sat down with a thud on the floor.

"What's the matter, you hurt?"

The mountain man's jaw opened and closed like that of a stranded fish. His eyes bulged and perspiration beaded his brow but words would not come.

The earless man squatted beside them. "Perhaps when he was cutting out the eyes he stayed too long in the room where the gas was."

"What kind of gas?"

"I don't know the names of gases."

"Dammit, what did it smell like?" Salty? Stinging?"

"No, like the flower with the red and white petals. Leave him alone," the young man's voice rose in sudden authority. "You haven't time for him. Put in the eyes."

But Jeff hastened to the medicine cabinet and took out an emetic and a heart stimulant. He knew that gas.

"Get to work on the master", I said. The earless one's voice rose a notch. "Quick or I shall kill you." He brought the large muzzle of his steel gun in line with Jeff's eyes.

"And The Assassin will die on the table," the doctor retorted as he pried open Taen's mouth.

"Garth," he shouted as he injected the heart stimulant into the now retching Taen.

When the jungle man came in, Jeff said, "Put him to bed. I'll be in to see him in a little while. You, throw away that sten gun and stick your hands close to that light."

"You're going to assist me with the operation."

"Me?" shrilled the young man.

"Yes. Turn the palms of your hands to the light. If you don't follow my directions, if you make the slightest mistake, you will have killed your master." Jeff examined the eyes in the solution. A neat job of removal, he thought. Plenty of surrounding meat to fill in the spaces. The one way to play this was as if the plan had worked. "Come here, stupid, let me show you the correct way to hold the hose."

As he pruned unnecessary tissue from the right eye, and injected the cell-stimulating pro-op into the six loosely banging muscles that would turn it, Jeff tried to find out, without giving his plan away, what had passed between The Assassin and Konrad, presuming that they found Konrad. But the earless one was so nervous his replies didn't make sense.

V

A GRENADE exploded outside, followed by a moaning voice. A mountain man burst into the operating room. "We can't hold them much longer. They must have finished the boys at the Coliseum because now there are hundreds of them. They're shooting at the house down the block. Pretty soon they'll figure out this is the house. Hurry it up."

Deliberately Jeff forgot the outside world and concentrated on the operation. With steady hands he drew out the end of the optic nerve like a small white worm and brought it close to the cross street of nerves in the old man's forehead, the optic chiasma. Wielding the high frequency sound nozzle with more speed than care, he eroded plenty of working area from the frontal bone. If he lived, this old man's forehead would be a veritable silver mine.

Nudging the earless one to use the suction hose so he could see what he was doing, Jeff slid the eye closer into its socket. He cranked down the reflection viewer and focused its rays through the eyeball. Now he had to work down through the cut between eye and forebrain and the going, even with the help of the semi-robot's steady hand, was uncertain. He didn't bother too

much with the muscles, just sewed them in and injected the growth catalyst. The arteries he sealed neatly together, squinting through the micro of the reflection viewer and focusing tediously on each one. A lot of blood was leaking down the old man's cheek though. If Taen were there to help he'd order a small transfusion.

As he worked on the second eye, The Assassin grew paler. Jeff gave him a hypo.

It was then that he saw what he should have seen all along—the golden necklace was gone.

An honest old devil, he thought. Probably left it on Konrad's chest, I hope. Unless he dropped it somewhere, the deal must be cancelled. Kit's safe—unless the old devil dies on me or can't see.

He stopped worrying about that and concentrated on making The Assassin see.

When it was over Jeff grinned with more confidence than he felt. The young man sat down on the floor with his head lowered between his knees. The Assassin began to groan very faintly. A grenade exploded against the side of the house.

Fumbling in his pants pocket for a match, Jeff addressed the few assassins that remained. "Better get him out of here right away."

"But how do we know it wasn't a trick? How do we know he can see?" A short, weary-faced mountain man, leaned against the door jamb, a skar cradled under his arm. His voice had the unpleasant sound of the one The Assassin said was to be successor. "He sees or you die."

"Come here." Jeff raised one of the eyelids. As he shadowed the staring eye with his hand the pupil enlarged perceptibly.

"But can he see out of it?"

"It may be some days before he can even distinguish light from darkness," Jeff replied cautiously.

With luck the old man might be able to do that now but there was no use sticking his neck out with his and Kit's lives depending on it.

"Then you are coming with us."

As Jeff opened his mouth to protest, the old man groaned loudly, then croaked: "The sky so blue. My crags, my people, the bright and glorious sun." He strained toward the germicidal light.

The earless young man rose to his side gasping: "He is dying."

"No," Jeff insisted. "He has just distinguished light from darkness. You'd better get him out of here before the Security Guards close in on this house."

"But first I must see the woman," the old man cried. "The cancellation of her death has cost me my necklace. After we disarmed Konrad, your advisor spoke alone with him; that accursed one begged me to cancel our agreement. To be ethical I had to give him the necklace since it was where the money went." He paused for breath. "I must see this woman who is worth more than a necklace. While Konrad was screaming some nonsense about your advisor double-crossing him, I swore I would see her who has cost me my necklace and the waste of a skar."

"But your eyes won't focus yet."

"We shall see. Let me up. Shade me from the sun."

So what if she sees him, Jeff thought. He will be just "that old murderer" with stranger's eyes.

He switched off The Assassin's "sun." Kit entered. The followers sidled from her advance, until the old man sat alone before her upon the operating table, turning his head vainly from side to side. For there was little current in the great nerves of his eyes as yet. The unused synapses did not make full contact.

"Woman, I hear your breathing. Your scent is close to me, Ranad, give me light again."

The heir swept back the curtain, throwing a beam of sunlight across the operating room. It gilded the side of the old man's face and as he turned his head blindly toward it, it lighted his strange eyes huge and bright.

Wide and deep, with buried spiders of red, fringed by lashes that beat as frantically as the wings of a wounded kauri, the eyes glowed. Their small black centers mirrored in duplicate Kit's face. They reflected in miniature her slow collapse into Jeff's arms in the instant of silence that followed her one word: "Konrad."

As Jeff carried her from the room, the earless young man crowded ahead of him, unwrapping his damp package.

"Please sire, am I not next?" He waved a freshly cut pair of ears in Jeff's face.

"Not right now," the doctor mumbled absently as he pushed through the doorway.

The door closed. The weapons of the assassins clashed bravely as they prepared the retreat to the crags and the old man croaked ecstatically of the beautiful woman he could not possibly have seen.

Two months later the outgoing rocket carried two passengers who held hands. A third passenger was on the way, an Earthman to be.



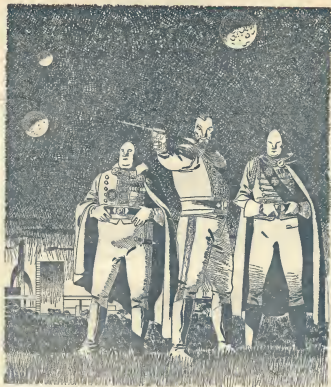
Spoilers of the Spaceways

By W. BRADFORD MARTIN

*Out beyond hyper-space soared the transmuted Terran
—to Trygon II—where all mad men die
willingly for the Empress.*

IT COULD be said that the Resistance began at the moment the great spaceship from Trygon II first appeared as an unknown body on the photographic plates at

Palomar, for while the astronomers propounded theories as to its origin and composition, it entered our atmosphere and came to earth on the runways of Idlewild



Airport, just outside of what was then New York City. Nothing need be said of the panic caused by its coming.

Three Trygonians went immediately in a ground car to the United Nations Building in the city. The records of their pronouncement have, unfortunately, been lost, but from subsequent events it has been established that they granted Terra fifteen days to submit to Trygonia.

Then they returned to space.

Fifteen days later they returned and crushed the feeble opposition they encountered.

ROSS SAVAGE was tired of seeing nothing but white; the walls and ceiling of his small, windowless room, the few pieces of utilitarian furniture and the sheets covering the narrow bed, which sagged under the weight of his muscularly massive, six-foot five-inch frame. He was tired too, of the white bandages on his hands and, although he could not see them, the white bandages that swathed his head and face, leaving only slits for his eyes and mouth.

Today is the day, he thought. Why don't they come? As if in answer to his unspoken question the door latch clicked. Savage

turned his head stiffly to watch the door open. As it swung wide the doctor entered, followed by General Strathmore and two nurses guiding a wheeled tray.

"It's time to take them off," the doctor said. No one answered, but Savage felt his hands grow sweaty in their wrappings.

As the group reached the bed a nurse handed the doctor a pair of surgical scissors. He bent over Savage as he said, "We'll take the hands first."

There was no sound other than the snip-snip of the scissors as the doctor carefully cut through the gauze. Finally the sound stopped and Savage looked at his hands. They were white and soft, but there were no scars to betray the fingerprint change.

The doctor permitted himself a small smile of satisfaction, but the room was pregnant with tension as he turned his attention to the gauze covering Savage's head.

The snip-snip came again as the cold steel slid slowly over his skin. An eternity passed before the sound again ceased and a nurse carefully removed the freed gauze. For a long moment there was no sound and Savage looked anxiously from face to face and tried to interpret what he read there. The nurses stared in disgust and horror while the doctor looked satisfied. The General beamed.

"Beautiful job," the General said finally, and the doctor nodded in agreement.

"Let me see," Savage croaked through stiff lips.

A nurse took the hand mirror from the bedside table and held it in front of him. From the glass the bearded face of a Trygonian stared at him; there was no mistaking the narrow chin, the high, broad cheekbones and aquiline nose.

ALMOST a month later Savage stood at attention in the General's office. He wore the flamboyantly brilliant uniform of a Trygonian officer. Medals and orders sparkled on his breast. His new face wore a sardonic scowl.

"Fleet captain Choon reporting, sir," he said, and the General's stern face relaxed to a half smile.

"Sit down, Ross," the General invited and indicated the chair beside his desk. "So you're ready to go, eh? How do you like yourself?"

"Well," Savage smiled, "I have to keep myself from going for my gun when I see myself in a mirror, but outside of that I'm pretty used to it by now."

"We've made tremendous strides in the twenty years since we went underground. I guess it was the pressure. But Phillips told me that by every test you're a Trygonian. I hope however, that you haven't become one emotionally. That was the one thing we were afraid of when we decided to use the Ceregraph. Choon died, of course, but how was it for you?"

"Nothing to it, sir, I just seemed to go to sleep and when I awoke I knew everything Choon knew, but Doctor Phillips almost drove me crazy testing me to find out whether I'd picked up Choon's mental outlook. Apparently, though, the Ceregraph transfers only knowledge, not emotions."

"Thank the Lord," exclaimed the General heavily.

"I want to thank you for this opportunity," Savage said. "I've wanted to do something concrete against them since they killed my parents twenty years ago."

"Whether or not you can do something concrete is up to you." The General was stern again. "You were chosen because of your physical and mental qualifications. You just happened to be Choon's exact physical double. Fortunately he was rather shorter than the average Trygonian."

"Doctor Phillips told me that, except for size, there is no anatomical difference between the Trygonians and ourselves," said Savage. "It is his theory that the highest intelligent life form on any planet suitable to the evolution of intelligent life will be a humanoid type."

"That may be possible, but exact duplication seems strange," the General said. "Although I'm interested in Trygon I haven't had a chance to read your report. I think you have time to fill me in on some of the details. Why do they call their planet Trygon II?"

"Trygon is the name of their sun," explained Savage. "Their system consists of three planets, Trygon I, II and III. Until about seven hundred years ago only the middle planet, Trygon II was inhabited by their race. Then they discovered a method of utilizing Solar energy directly and what

amounted to a social revolution took place.

"At the time, Trygon II was divided into a number of countries. The discovery was made in a country called Czur and with it Czur conquered the rest of the planet. They used pretty brutal methods, but they welded the entire planet into one country using one language and having one ruler.

Space was the next step and they explored the other planets. The innermost one was hot and lush and eventually they tamed it and now they grow all their food there. The third planet, as might be expected was cold and bare, but it was fantastically rich in minerals. They transferred their mining and manufacturing to the third planet, leaving Trygon II the center of trade, the rich and the military.

"There are a number of commercial spaceports but only one military. It's near the capital city, named Czur in honor of the country that started it all.

"Two hundred years ago they ventured into deep space. Earth is the fifth humanoid planet they have conquered."

"That's quite a history," said the General. "What form of government do they have?"

"Autocratic. The Emperor is the supreme authority, but the High Commissioner works out the details and sees that the orders are carried out. All military matters are in the hands of the Emperor and in that respect the High Commissioner is just a figure head. As you can imagine there is a good deal of intrigue."

"Yes, I can see that there would be," agreed the General. He glanced at the wall clock. "But it's almost H-hour."

"Are there any last orders?" Savage asked.

The General smiled wryly. "It might be said that there were no first orders. You're on your own, Ross. We don't know what you can do, but if you can get into one of their intrigue groups you should be able to do something. The rank of Fleet captain carries a lot of weight. All I can say is be careful and do your best.

"The skeleton crew is moving out and the station is going on automatic as soon as you leave."

Savage stood up, saluted and then the General took his hand and shook it warmly. Savage turned and walked out of the office without looking back.

Outside two guards waited and they walked together down a long hall to a bare, cement-walled room. There was only one way to make sure that he would look like an escaped prisoner and they had to make sure. So they fought and when they were through, his uniform was a sad caricature of its former splendor and he had the beginnings of a black eye.

He shook hands with the two men and then went up three flights of stairs where the Trygonian patrol ship waited. There was no one in sight as he climbed into the ship and roared away, but anti-aircraft guns opened up almost immediately. Savage smiled grimly as he saw the shells burst a safe distance from him.

THEN, as he was almost out of range, the ship lurched from the blast of a near miss. A hole appeared in the hull beside him and he saw his sleeve rip and redden as a fragment cut across his arm. He switched on the automatics and cursed the unknown gunner as he crudely bandaged the flesh wound with part of his already torn shirt. At least, he thought, finally, it would add verisimilitude to his story.

An hour later he crash-landed on the outskirts of what had once been Denver, Colorado, and what was now the Trygonian Capital for North America. Then he settled down to wait for the Trygonians.

Something less than ten minutes passed before a ground car skidded to a stop near the wrecked ship. Two Trygonian soldiers jumped out with hand-blasters at the ready. More sedately, as befitted his rank, a Senior Lieutenant followed and Savage walked briskly to meet him. The Lieutenant eyed Savage dubiously for a brief moment and then snapped to the salute.

"At ease," Savage ordered. "Take me to Headquarters immediately."

"Yes, sir," the Lieutenant replied and followed Savage into the car. It was evident that he was wondering why such an exalted personage as a full Fleet captain should appear in a single place patrol ship and in this condition, but Savage let him wonder. The soldiers reentered the car and they sped away with a full-throated roar.

Savage remained grimly silent as they roared through the Trygonian capital. Try-

gonians were everywhere, but still Earthmen predominated, and Savage wondered what had induced them to remain. There were probably many reasons, he decided, for man in spite of everything must live somewhere and he must eat. After twenty years they were probably used to it.

He had lived briefly in Denver as a child, but nothing remained now of the city he had known. The old buildings had been blasted during the invasion and starkly functional ferro-concrete had replaced the rubble. At the very site of the old State Capitol the Trygonians had raised a towering structure to house the offices of the High Command.

They filed into the building and, as the Lieutenant had done, the honor guard eyed him dubiously before snapping to attention. Savage strode haughtily between them and finally, after a succession of guards and lesser officers, he was ushered into the presence of Vice Admiral Harna lor-Harna.

"Fleet captain Choon," he announced.

The Admiral was tremendous. He towered a full foot over Savage and his heavily decorated uniform was stretched tightly over a majestic paunch. His great jowls moved loosely as he boomed:

"Choon, by the great Galactic Gods. I knew your father on the old Arrano. He was the best Executive Officer I ever had.

"But sit down—you may leave, Lieutenant—and tell me what you are doing here. What happened to your uniform?"

"I was taken by the Terrans." The Admiral's eyes became icy chips. "I have just escaped from a Terran stronghold . . ."

"Have you, by the Eternal Stars," the Admiral interrupted. "Too many of our men have vanished in spite of reprisals, but this is the first definite proof of an organized movement. Where is it?"

"About five hundred ling North in the mountains," Savage said and the Admiral went into action. With his left hand he flipped a switch and a colored relief map of the area sprang into view on the wall, while with his right hand he pushed up a row of communicator buttons.

"Ready three attack units for immediate takeoff," he roared. "I will take personal command. Have my car at gate three."

With the buttons still up he asked, "What

is the exact location?"

Savage moved quickly to the map and examined it closely. After a moment's hesitation he said, "As closely as I can make it, it was zone, three, sector five. It was well camouflaged."

The Admiral roared the location into the communicator and slammed down the buttons. With swiftness surprising for one of his bulk he strode to the door.

"You will come with me in my flagship, Choon. These miserable savages won't give us much of a fight, but it may be of some interest. We'll both be decorated for this."

II

AN HOUR and twenty minutes later the fifteen unit fleet was bovering high over the Canadian Rockies, zone three, sector five. At the Admiral's direction Savage examined the mountain below through the electronic scanners. Although he knew there was no one left in the hidden cavern below him it was an effort to point it out, it had been his home for a long time.

The Admiral barked co-ordinates into the microphone and then barked an order. One ship detached itself from the formation and dived toward the hidden entrance of the cavern, its heat guns burning great swaths through trees and brush. It made a second pass and antiquated anti-aircraft guns opened up, tearing the air futilely.

Savage barely suppressed a start of surprise before remembering that the guns were automatic-radar controlled.

The Admiral roared into the microphone again: "Squadron three cover, one and two land and deploy for attack. Remember, I want prisoners."

As the ships descended the anti-aircraft guns opened up again from their now revealed turrets and as they fired the Trygonian guns blasted them into so much molten scrap. Finally they were completely silenced and the attack ships landed and the soldiers deployed. They were almost to the entrance and Savage was beginning to wonder what had happened to the trips, when an Atomic blast took away the side of the mountain.

The troops and five Trygonian ships went with it.

The Admiral had had within his grasp a stronghold of the resistance and he had lost it. It could be argued that the loss could not have been avoided, but in his service such an argument was not admissible. A full report was sent to Trygon II and both the Admiral and Choon were recalled.

The three ships which first found Terra had been equipped with ordinary Space Drive and had been in space for more than eighteen years. Lacking a radio which would cover the immense distance, one of the ships had taken a second eighteen years to make a report of the conquest. But in the meantime both space radio and Space Warp had been achieved, and forty-five days after the abortive attack they were on Trygon II.

They were placed under house arrest in hotel suites and two days later the Admiral was given a swift trial. He was demoted three grades and then given permission to retire.

Having extracted the penalty for failure from its Admiral the Supreme Command would next turn its attention to erring Fleet captain; capture by the enemy was bad enough, but he had given the information which had led to serious losses. Confined in his suite he waited anxiously for two days more without receiving word and then he received a visit from a Captain Lin.

After identifying himself, Lin said, "You are in serious trouble with the High Commissioner, sir, and not about your capture or the attack on the Terran stronghold. At least, not directly. You had better sit down while I tell you what happened."

"I will stand, thank you," Savage said coldly.

"As you wish, sir. Its hard to believe, but every file and record concerning you for the past two years, as well as the records of the trial have been either destroyed or rewritten. Officially, you are here on leave. And to top it off Ior-Harna was found dead this morning. The evidence pointed to suicide, but it is believed to be murder."

"What?" exclaimed Savage and found a chair.

"The High Commissioner is blowing his jets," continued Lin with thinly veiled excitement. "He doesn't know how it was done, but he suspects that the Empress ordered it. If that's the case his hands are tied,

but in the meantime he'll do anything to get you.

"I have been instructed to advise you to deny everything except that you are indeed home on leave. Incidentally, no one is to know of my visit."

"How about the guards?" Savage asked.

Lin smiled. "I am in command of the guard detail. I must return to duty now, but please remember that you are a person of extreme importance and as such you must be very careful."

Before Savage could reply, Lin turned on his heel and left the room, leaving him to ponder this sudden turn of events. How could anyone change everything so completely, he wondered. If it was on the Empress' order, why should she take such an interest in him? Why should Lin give him the information? Who did he represent?

An hour later a knock on the door brought him out of his private Hell.

THE panel slid open and a Lieutenant in the jet black uniform of the Fleet CID strode in importantly. Behind him came four enlisted men in the same uniform, two of whom planted themselves firmly beside the door with their hands on open-bolstered blasters. The other two wheeled in an equipment table.

Savage waited with silent calm while the Lieutenant crossed the room and drew himself to attention. Then he asked sharply:

"What is the meaning of this intrusion? I demand every courtesy of house arrest and this does not fall in that category."

"I am under the explicit orders of the High Commissioner," the officer said icily. "Any complaints should be addressed to him. I have also been instructed to take any necessary action to carry out my orders."

"And what are they?" Savage parried.

"Please be good enough to follow me to the table," the officer said, fingering his blaster. Savage followed.

At the table the officer flipped a switch and from somewhere in the apparatus came a muffled hum. Then a flat plate set into the surface of the table glowed and Savage was instructed to place his hands, palms down, on the plate. He did so and the officer pushed a button.

"You may remove your hands," he said

and bent over a double eyepiece. After adjusting and readjusting a pair of knobs he raised his head and gave Savage a surprised look. He bent down again and made new adjustments. At last he straightened up. His voice lacked some of its former arrogance as he said, "Thank you, sir."

The Lieutenant and his men left without saying anything further and Savage wondered what they had tried to prove with a fingerprint check. Apparently, however, the High Commissioner was covering every angle. The episode gave Savage a momentary feeling of pleasure, which however was quickly replaced by his former doubts.

Several hours passed, during which he had lunch, before a knock again sounded. This time, as the door slid open, Savage could see a double row of crimson-uniformed men, the personal guard of the High Commissioner himself. The guards stiffened to attention as the Commissioner appeared, followed by a group of high ranking officers.

Now what, Savage wondered as he ramrodded his spine and saluted.

The group stopped in front of Savage and the Commissioner didn't bother to conceal his distaste as he announced without preamble, "His Supreme Mightiness, Emperor Hlar, Ruler of the Universe, has seen fit to bestow upon you, Fleet Captain Jarlon Choon, the Order of Trygon."

At the mention of the decoration an officer stepped forward with a flat, gold case. Opening it, he took from it a heavy golden chain, from which depended a jewel encrusted medallion. This he hung about Savage's neck. Then he stepped back into position and the Commissioner went on:

"I am further instructed to inform you that you have been promoted to the rank of Commodore. Commodore Loong here will give you further orders."

Savage's senses reeled from this succession of shocks as the Commissioner turned and strode out with his retinue, leaving only the officer who had presented the decoration.

Loong waited until the door was completely closed and then he laughed uproariously. Savage could only look at him with amazement until he finally stopped and said, "Did you see the look on his face? I think he would almost rather have marooned himself on an asteroid."

"I don't understand," Savage said.

"To tell you the truth, I don't either," Loong replied. "Have you ever been to Court?"

"I was born in Space," said Savage.

"That checks and that's what puzzles me. I have been reliably informed that it was the Empress' agents who caused the alteration of your records. In addition to that, Palace gossip has it that she persuaded the Emperor to honor and promote you. The Emperor was against it. You saw for yourself how the High Commissioner felt. What's the explanation?"

"I have none," Savage replied stiffly.

Loong glanced at him sharply and said, "In addition the Empress expects you at the Palace this evening. Full dress uniform is required, of course. I think you should also wear this." He produced a small, bolstered needle gun. "It's not as messy as a blaster, but just as effective at close range. Above all, be careful. You have very few friends."

SAVAGE took the gun and went to his room to change. Things were moving a little too swiftly. Why was the Empress so interested in him? There were a lot of unanswered questions and no immediate way to get the answers. He dressed quickly, strapped the needle gun to his left wrist, and returned to the living room.

"How do you fit in?" he asked Loong bluntly.

"As an officer in the Space Fleet I am under the orders of the Emperor, the Empress and the High Commissioner," he answered evasively. "I have arranged for a car. The driver has his instructions."

"You are not coming?" Savage asked.

"No, but I'll be here when you return. In the meantime I've ordered supper."

The brilliantly lighted Palace was thronged with splendid uniforms and lavish gowns and the main hall was a babble of sound. It stilled abruptly when the name of Commodore Choon was announced. All eyes were on him as a servant guided him across the floor; the women gazing at him with frank speculation and the assembled officers and statesmen with envy or thinly veiled hatred. Loong was right, he had few friends.

He was led up the long, curving flight

of stairs and the babble burst out anew behind him. At the end of a long hall they stopped before a plain door and the servant rapped lightly. Without waiting for an answer he opened the door and motioned Savage inside.

The Empress was regally beautiful, tall and slim in a sweeping, brilliantly hued gown. Although she was more than twice Savage's age neither her face or figure showed it. She extended her hand as Savage crossed the room and knelt before her. He kissed her hand and she said:

"Rise, Commodore Choon, son of Admiral Choon. Come, sit beside me."

"Thank you," said Savage.

"A long time ago I knew your father very well," she said. She smiled reminiscently and murmured, "Very well. And we too shall know each other well. You are fully as handsome as he was." And so, one question was answered.

He remained with her a long time, and when he retraced his steps to the main hall he found it more crowded than before. Again all conversation ceased as he entered the main hall and he could feel countless hostile eyes on him. He felt decidedly uncomfortable as he crossed the seemingly endless room and he felt himself walking too stiffly. He tried to relax, but instead he found himself pressing the needle gun against his side to make sure it was still there.

Finally he reached the great double doors and he heard speculative murmurs behind him as the footmen opened them. This was the heart of a powerful interplanetary empire and yet it was no different than the courts of Europe during the heyday of the ancient kings.

His chauffeured car waited outside the Palace and in a moment he was speeding down the winding roadway through barely visible gardens and groves. Then they passed the gates to the public highway. As they slowed and turned the corner there came the flare of heat guns.

The glassite windows on the attacked side turned a rosy pink and then went black. The interior of the car became insufferably hot. The chauffeur cursed and trod heavily on the accelerator and the car shot forward. Flame licked at them until they were out of range.

The driver mopped his brow as he said, "It's a good thing she's got full armor. Even so, I thought we'd had it."

"Yes," snapped Savage.

They roared through the now almost deserted streets without further incident. On his guard now, Savage had the little needle gun in his hand when they stopped in front of the hotel. The doorman stepped forward and pulled open the door. He looked into the car and his hand flashed into his uniform. Savage fired.

The gun made no sound, but the doorman gave a choking gasp and fell into the car.

"Quick, sir, pull him all the way in," Savage heard the chauffeur whisper. "There were no witnesses. I'll take care of him."

Without stepping to think Savage followed the chauffeur's advice and dragged the heavy weight into the car while the chauffeur alighted and came around to help him. Finally they closed the door on the body and, still without witnesses, the chauffeur drove it away.

In his suite, Savage found Loong waiting. "Good morning," Loong smiled. "How did everything go?"

"Just fine," Savage replied. "Not only do I have no friends, I have some active enemies."

"You were attacked?" Loong asked calmly.

"Twice," Savage said. "You don't seem very surprised."

"I rather expected it, but you seem to have survived. What happened?"

Savage told him in a few brief sentences and when he was finished Loong said:

"This is better than I had hoped."

"Better than you'd hoped," Savage exclaimed. "What am I, a target for your friends to shot at?"

"They are no friends of mine," Loong answered. "You've been in Space for a long time. I'd better fill you in on recent history right now."

III

IT WAS at that point that Savage was shocked to find that the anger seething inside him was not that of Terran toward Trygonian, but of one Trygonian toward an-

other, or one Terran toward another. He found too that, in spite of the uncertainty he felt about Loong, he was actually beginning to like him. He wondered then if Doctor Phillip's tests were accurate.

"That's better," Loong smiled when Savage sat down. "Here, have a drink and I'll tell you what I think the shooting is about."

Savage took the proffered glass and waited expectantly.

"As you know," Loong began, "Kalnor was Emperor until Hlar, then High Commissioner, staged a coup d'etat. Kalnor and his family were murdered and Hlar proclaimed himself Emperor. Czako, our present High Commissioner, was Captain of the household Guard and was elevated to his present lofty position as a reward for his part in the conspiracy.

"During the years you have been in space our esteemed High Commissioner has secretly been laying the groundwork for a coup of his own. The situation is really quite simple; the Emperor wants to remain Emperor, while Czako wants to become Emperor. Fortunately, at the moment neither seems powerful enough to dispose of the other.

"Now consider the situation as it applies to you. A formerly unknown and unnoticed Fleet captain has suddenly been decorated and promoted on the orders of Hlar himself, and this after records concerning him were altered. He has been invited to the private chambers of the Emperor, where few men are invited. The High Commissioner fears the Emperor and Hlar is jealous of his wife. So . . .

Loong spread his hands expressively to finish the sentence, but Savage needed no more.

"That's clear enough," he said, "but how do you fit in?"

"I am the faithful servant of the Emperor and his representative, the High Commissioner."

"You said that before," Savage said.

Loong just spread his hands again. Then he asked abruptly:

"What do you think of our planetary policies?"

The question took Savage aback. "What do you mean?" he stalled.

"I mean our policy of immediate conquest and subjugation of any inhabited planet we discover," Loong replied.

"That depends," said Savage carefully. He drank slowly, watching Loong over the edge of the glass.

"On what I think?" smiled Loong. "I know what I think. I want your opinion."

Savage decided to take a chance. "I believe a friendly, diplomatic approach would be a far better method," he said. "For example, in the case of Terra . . ."

"Exactly," Loong interrupted heatedly. "Nothing permanent is gained by force. A conquered people will not remain so forever."

Savage's glass suddenly slipped from his hand. As though from a great distance he watched the liquid splash on the rug and then the room seemed to be receding in the distance. He tried to rise, urgently aware of his dangers, but instead he felt himself collapse. Then all sensation ceased.

He had no idea how much later it was when he awakened in his own bedroom. Other than a slight headache he felt no effects of the drug. He saw that the Trygonian day had come again, but that meant nothing; he could have been unconscious for several days. Then he rolled over and found that Loong was sitting beside the bed.

"I'm sorry I had to do that," Loong said calmly, "but I had to be sure."

"Sure of what?" Savage said, checking an impulse to say more violent things.

"Your sympathies."

"And?"

Loong reached inside his tunic and brought out a needle gun. "Your scientists did an excellent piece of work."

"What do you mean?" Savage asked, and at the same time knew there was no escape.

"I mean that you are a Terran. You betrayed yourself under hypnosis."

Savage knew the bitter feeling of utter defeat. He had accomplished nothing and now this was the end. But Loong wasn't wearing the look of triumph that was to have been expected. Instead he was smiling and he put the gun away as he said:

"I should hate to see you executed. I wasn't just talking last night when I disagreed with our policies. I think a friendly and mutually beneficial relationship can and

should be established between our planets."

"That's fine," said Savage, "but what can you do about it?"

"That remains to be seen," answered Loong. "I propose that we join forces. The fact that you have been able to come this far makes you a worthy ally. And without me you can do nothing. Is it agreed?"

"Yes," said Savage.

"Excellent. I have several matters to attend to, but I will return at six. As a recently returned space officer it will be expected that you enter social life to a certain extent and I think it best that you begin tonight."

AFTER Loong had gone Savage cursed himself for a fool, yet he thanked the gods that he was still alive. Something could still be made of this. A vague, uncrystallized thought was gnawing at his mind. He jumped out of bed and dressed quickly. He was not surprised to find that Loong had left him the needle gun. Without bothering with food he went to the State Library.

His rank carried him into the innermost recesses of the great library, to the guarded tape banks where the most accurate information was to be found. After a quick search of the index he selected two tapes and then took one of the many unoccupied reading booths.

He slipped the first tape, an ancient history of Trygon II to fill the blanks in Choon's education, into the projector, and all thought of time left him as he slumped down in the soft chair before the screen. It wasn't long before he realized that a rough parallel could be drawn between the early histories of Trygon and Terra.

There had been wars and famines and great empires, but Trygon had progressed more rapidly, without the great recessions Terra had known. Three-quarters of a century before the beginning of Atomics on Terra, Trygonian scientists had already harnessed solar energy. At that point the parallel ended.

It was already late when he turned to the history of the Kalnor family. He found that they had ruled for almost a century—first Czur, then Trygon II and finally the System and the Empire. There had been periods when usurpers had gained control, but al-

ways the Kalnors had returned, until finally Klar, determined to put an end to the family, had destroyed them. The tape hinted vaguely that there had been a survivor and then immediately discredited the thought.

Then the tape came to an end and Savage put them both away. Things were somewhat cleared now.

Loong, in a full dress uniform hung heavily with decorations, was again waiting when Savage returned to the hotel.

"What were you doing at the State Library?" Loong asked after they had exchanged guardedly friendly salutations.

"Doing a little checking," Savage said calmly. "I have a theory that I'm working on. By the way, I haven't eaten all day. Will you order something for me while I change?"

"I have already done so. You'll find a fresh full dress in the bedroom. You can tell me about your theory when you're finished."

Savage went to the bedroom and found beside the fresh uniform a belted holster containing a larger version of the needle gun he still wore. As he hefted it came the reason for his presence on Trygon II came to him again, and he thought about Loong.

By training and instinct he should have hated him and all Trygonians for what they had done to his people, but he found it a hard struggle to achieve that feeling. He liked and somehow trusted Loong and at the same time he still wanted freedom for Terra. Still pondering the problem he dressed quickly, not neglecting to buckle on the gun, and returned to the living room.

A food laden table awaited him. Loong poured drinks as he entered and gave him one.

"What is your theory?" Loong asked.

"It's not definite yet. I'll tell you when it is."

"Very well," replied Loong. "I want to apologize again for last night."

"I'd have done the same thing," Savage said.

They ate quickly and in silence. When they were through, Loong declared:

"You're in for a treat tonight. I have reservations at the Club Galaxy."

"Oh?" said Savage with polite interest. He had seen or heard the name somewhere,

but it meant nothing to him.

"We'll have to hurry or we'll miss the first show," Loong said, and pushed back his chair. "I have a car waiting outside."

"Armored?" Savage asked.

"Completely."

THE existence of the Club Galaxy was discreetly proclaimed by a small, lighted sign and inside the theme of smallness was continued. Packed into its narrow confines was the highest strata of Trygonian society, uniforms predominating. They were guided to a microscopic ringside table just as the already dim lights dimmed still further.

From somewhere came soft, gentle music and a spotlight went on to reveal a male trio. They sang a song, barely heard over the buzz of conversation, and then bowed themselves out to the accompaniment of a light spattering of applause. Then the lights faded out completely and the spotlight cut off. All conversation ceased and an air of expectancy filled the room.

With an unexpectedness that made Savage catch his breath, the music crashed out in a wild, driving rhythm. The spotlight cut suddenly through the dark and caught a whirling figure in the center of the floor. The audience gave a gasp of appreciation in which Savage shared.

The dancer spun on her toes, a tall, long-legged girl in the briefest of costumes, her long hair flashing in a golden circle. She broke the spin abruptly and danced with flashing feet and writhing body to the wild rhythms. She moved with the precision of a fine machine, yet with the graceful beauty of a wild cat.

She gave a magnificent performance and when the spotlight suddenly cut out, her audience shouted its approval. But when the lights went on again she had disappeared and, in spite of the ovation, she did not return to the floor.

"She never takes a bow," Loong explained, "but you will meet her shortly."

A waiter suddenly loomed large over them and Loong spoke to him briefly and he went away again. They made small talk and presently the waiter returned, bearing three glasses and a decanter of purple liquor. Savage questioned the third glass with the raise of an eyebrow.

"Laharna is to join us," Loong explained. "It is a great honor to be favored with her presence at one's table."

Almost as if summoned by Loong's words she appeared on the opposite side of the floor. She crossed it with the same easy grace she had shown in her dance, her hair flowing gently down over her bare shoulders as she moved. Although she had typically Trygonian features, Savage thought her the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. He wondered if it was Choon's influence again.

They stood to receive her and Savage found that she was as tall as he.

"May I present Commodore Jarlon Choon," Loong said and Savage bowed.

"Delighted, Commodore. I have heard a great deal about you." Her green eyes sparkled at him mischievously.

"I am honored . . ." Savage began, but a harsh voice behind him interrupted:

"Choon, the Empress' lover, is trying to make another conquest."

Savage spun around, his fists clenched, but Loong grabbed his arm.

"Careful," he whispered urgently, "that's Satish, the High Commissioner's right hand man."

Savage shrugged him off and, remembering the formula, said:

"You have affronted my honor, sir. Who is your friend?"

Attention had been drawn to them at the arrival of Laharna, but this exchange brought all eyes on them. Satish stood up, towering over Savage, and said thickly:

"Captain Droga will act for me."

"Let it pass," interjected Loong. "He is drunk."

"Not too drunk to teach this whelp to respect his superiors," Satish bellowed. "Captain Droga, make the arrangements."

His distaste for the affair evident, Loong reluctantly conferred with Captain Droga, while the two principals stood aloofly silent. In the end it was decided that the duel was to take place immediately on the grounds of the Palace of the Stars. The choice of weapons was Savage's and he decided on needle guns.

Satish and his two companions stamped out and Savage turned to Laharna, who had stood silently by.

"I deeply apologize for causing you this

embarrassment," he said.

She looked at him soberly for a moment. Then she smiled and gave him her hand.

"Until we meet again," she said.

"Thank you," he said and turned away, reluctant to leave her. A lane opened through the hostile faces surrounding them. They walked out quickly and found their car waiting.

"Now you've done it," Loong said as they entered the car. "Satish is deadly with the needle gun. If you lose, the High Commissioner will have my head for being your second."

"And if I should win?" Savage asked.

"I don't know. We may be able to salvage something if I can get to the Commissioner first. But we're not ready yet. The 'Agreet' is just beginning her trials in the morning, and I've had word that you are to be her captain. We must have her if we are to do anything at all."

"And as her captain, you must have me," Savage said.

"Not exactly, but it would be a help."

"We'll have to see what happens," Savage said and relaxed against the cushions.

IV

THEY raced through the crowded streets and then out of the city. A short time later they pulled to a stop on the dueling grounds and found that Satish had already arrived. Savage moved to open the door and Loong said:

"Wait, I'm taking no chances."

He opened a compartment built into the back of the driver's seat and took out a pair of heat guns. He buckled one to his belt and gave the other to the chauffeur with instructions to keep his eyes open.

"All right," he said, "we're as prepared as we'll ever be. I just hope you can shoot straight."

The two parties met in the middle of the field and a further discussion took place between Loong and Droga. The car lights were to provide illumination and their positions were established. Then the guns were examined. Finally Satish and Savage were placed in position with ten yards between them and the guns were given them. The seconds backed away.

"Under the rules you will raise your guns and fire one shot at the count of three," Loong said loudly. "Only head shots are permitted. If both miss, honor is satisfied, and the principals will leave the field. Your guns down, please, I am about to count."

Savage braced his feet and stood relaxed, a light, firm grip on his gun.

"One."

What was the connection between Larhana and Loong, Savage wondered, and what was Loong's plan?

"Two."

He had to go along with Loong, he decided. His comments on the Terran situation presented interesting possibilities. Larhana was the most beautiful woman he had ever known.

"Three."

With a swift, continuous motion Savage swung up the gun, centered the sights and pressed the stud. There was no sound, no sensation, and for a moment he thought they had both missed. Then Satish swayed and crumpled.

Savage lowered his gun. Under the rules he had to remain in position until notified of the results. Others ran to Satish. Loong bent over him briefly and then shouted, "He's dead."

Savage walked toward the huddled group and as he approached, Droga protested.

"That was not a head shot," he said heatedly. "Look, it grazed the chin and entered the neck."

"I beg to differ," Loong countered.

"I insist," argued Droga. "I demand satisfaction."

"I concur with Captain Droga," broke in Satish's second companion. "I will act for him."

"But . . ." Loong protested and Savage interrupted:

"If he insists, he insists. It is his right."

They were quickly placed in position and again Loong counted. At "Three" Savage again swung up the needle gun and pressed the stud. Droga's head snapped back as his shot entered the ground almost at Savage's feet.

Savage remained in position until Loong summoned him.

"There's no doubt about it this time,"

Loong said triumphantly. "Right between the eyes."

"Honor is satisfied," said Satish's second companion and he turned away. He walked a step and spun around, a blaster in his hand. A blaster cut him in half. Loong's chauffeur had kept his eyes open.

Then there came a blaze of heat, this time from Satish's car, and flame burned the grass beside them. Loong's chauffeur turned his attention to the car. A stink filled the air. Loong worked his heat gun and they made their way back to their car behind a wall of fire. They roared away and there was no fire from the other car.

"I didn't think a heat gun was any good for spot shooting," the chauffeur apologized, "so I used a blaster."

"Good thing," said Loong, "or we'd all been fried."

He opened the well stocked compartment and brought out a blaster. "Take this," he said to Savage. "I'll drop you at your hotel and then try to see the High Commissioner. You had better stay in your rooms until you hear from me."

Savage was breakfasting in his room the next morning when the communicator buzzed.

"Loong here," it announced, when Savage answered. "Things have come to a head. I couldn't get to see the High Commissioner, but he has already had an interview with the Emperor. I can only guess what it was about, but I'm told that it was pretty stormy."

"But that's the least of it. The Commissioner has just issued secret orders for your arrest. Go to the roof of the hotel. One of my hilocars is already on its way to pick you up."

"Thanks. I'm on my way," Savage replied, and disconnected. He buckled on the blaster and with a needle gun in his hand he went to the door. The hall outside was empty and he ran swiftly to the service stairs.

On the floor above he ran to the levitor bank and pressed the "up" stud. He watched the indicator impatiently as the levitor shot upward and stopped on the floor below. Then it resumed its upward climb and Savage held the needle gun ready as the doors slid apart to reveal a CID man with

a blaster in his hand.

Savage fired and leaped into the car as the blaster clattered to the floor. The CID man was still crumpling as Savage pressed the stud for the top floor.

When the levitor doors again slid apart Savage jammed them with a blaster and raced up the stairs to the roof, praying that the hilocar would be waiting. It was there and it took off with savage acceleration as soon as he was aboard. Blaster and heat gun fire burned the air as they rose and then it faded out of range.

"Whew," Savage breathed, "that was close."

"We're not out of it yet," the pilot replied. "There's a CID hilocar on our tail."

A glance behind confirmed the pilot's statement and Savage said:

"My hand blaster won't do any good against the stuff they carry. Can you get away from them?"

"I'm using full power, but they're gaining. There's a high powered heater mounted behind you. I'll bring it up."

A SECTION of the fuselage slid open and a long, turret-mounted heat gun rose into view. At the same time the seat bank slid down to permit entry into the turret. Savage climbed in and settled himself over the sights.

"All right," he said, "cut your speed."

At full aperture this weapon didn't require supreme accuracy. Savage pressed the firing stud and the other hilocar was engulfed in flame and then it exploded. Savage's pilot dived to ground level and after half an hour of maneuvering between, over and sometimes almost through hills and trees they were deep in the mountains south of the city.

They landed in a mountain clearing. Then the trees in front of them slid apart and they rolled down into a ferro-concrete cavern; the Terran stronghold repeated.

Larhana greeted him as he alighted.

"What are you doing here?" he asked involuntarily.

"I am wanted too," she said. "Hurry, Commodore Loong is waiting for us."

The cavern hummed with swift, orderly activity. Larhana led him quickly through it, but Savage had time to note the fighting

ships being readied and the blasters and heat guns being uncanted and loaded. Finally they entered a small room where Loong, alone, awaited them.

"Quite a place you have here," Savage said.

"We've been preparing for a long time," replied Loong, "and now we are going to make use of it."

"How, Prince Kalnor?" asked Savage quietly. His hand was on the needle gun in his pocket.

"The High Commissioner has. . . What did you say?"

"Prince Kalnor, your Majesty."

"How did you know that?" Loong asked. He clutched at his blaster. But Savage brought out the needle gun and he stopped the movement.

"It was evident from the beginning that you were not working with either the High Commissioner or the Emperor, but at the same time it was evident that you were highly placed in a third organization. Then you yourself mentioned the Kalnor family and I went to the State Library.

"With two powerful factions competing for the Empire, it struck me that only the Kalnor name would attract enough adherents to form a third party. It wasn't until a few moments ago that I realized that you were the Kalnor in question; that you would be the leader and not a follower.

"Now that we each know who the other is, I'd like to know exactly what you intend to do about Terra after we've put you on the throne of Trygon."

"I meant what I said the other day," the Prince exclaimed. "Terra will be free. And in time the friendly relationship of which I spoke can be established."

Savage realized that he could use the Prince to bargain with the Emperor, but once he had Kalnor would the Emperor stick to the terms of whatever bargain he had made? No, it was ridiculous to think that he would. He would have to trust the Prince. "That's all right with me," Savage said, and put away his gun. "I'd like to know what's happened, though."

"An attempt was made on the Emperor's life, and at the same time, the High Commissioner proclaimed himself Emperor. Something went wrong, however, and the

Emperor did not die. As a result we have what amounts to war between the two factions, confined to the military and the city of Czur. The average Trygonian citizen won't become involved."

"How about your men?" Savage asked.

"They are adapting to conditions and at the same time spreading a rumor that a Kalnor will come. When I give the signal they will drop all pretense and fight for the name of Kalnor. Now we must hurry to get control of the *Agreet*. A ship is being readied to take us there."

"All right. Let's go," said Savage, the light of battle in his eyes.

"I'm coming too," announced Larhana and they looked at her in surprise.

"It'll be no place for a woman," Savage said. "There'll probably be a battle."

Larhana's green eyes darkened and Loong said, "There's no use arguing with her. If she's made up her mind to come nothing short of a blaster will stop her."

"You're right," Larhana said and they went out together.

LOONG'S ship proved to be one of the latest medium fighters, crammed with firepower and short on passenger space. They found cramped space against the control room bulkhead and blasted off.

Minutes later they were approaching the great Fleet Spaceport, on which rested the tremendous *Agreet*. A minor battle was in progress below them for control of the port, but it was impossible to tell one faction from the other. Loong's radio operator worked his instrument with swift efficiency and the gunners peered into their scanner plates and fingered their controls.

After a suspense-filled eternity the radio-man said "Okay" and their ship dived toward the *Agreet*. A port opened in the huge hull and they floated in.

They alighted quickly and a pneumatic car carried them swiftly forward to the bridge.

There they were met by an officer whom Loong introduced as Captain Slan.

"Everything is ready, your Highness," Slan said, careful not to notice the presence of Larhana. "The officers faithful to either the High Commissioner or the Pretender

have been confined. The bare minimum for the operation of the ship remain."

"Very good," said Loong with formal dignity. "Commodore Choon, will you kindly take command?"

"Yes, sir. Captain Slan, you will take off immediately and establish an orbit at three diameters. All screens are to be thrown out as soon as we are clear and any ship that attempts to interfere is to be destroyed."

"Yes, sir," said Slan and he went to the main controls. The ship vibrated strongly for a moment and then they felt it rise gathering momentum as it went.

"We made it," said Larhana, taking Savage's arm.

"Yes," said Savage stiffly, "but we still have a lot to do."

He was very certain now that she had attracted all Trygonian officialdom to the Club Galaxy so that information could be gathered from liquor-loosened lips for Loong, but he didn't know how much further their relationship extended.

The return of Slan recalled Savage to the problem at hand.

"Good news, your Highness," he announced. "Our men have captured the Pretender and are proceeding according to plan."

"And the Commissioner," Loong asked. "Where is he?"

"He is directing the operations of his forces from his offices in the Supreme Headquarters Building, your Highness. What are your orders?"

"He must be destroyed at any cost," Loong said grimly. "An assault would be indicated."

"Screens have been set up to guard the building," Slan said. "The most powerful blaster will not penetrate them."

"We must use the *Agreeet's* Atomics then . . ."

"You'd destroy half the city," Savage interrupted. "There's been too much bloodshed already."

"What do you suggest, then?" asked Loong.

"Have you any men in the building?" Savage asked.

"We have not been able to contact any," Slan said.

"Well, perhaps this will work. We will

make a concentrated attack, using the *Agreeet's* armed scouts and your fighter. During the attack I can take one of the scouts under the screen, land near the building, and force my way in."

"That might succeed," agreed Loong. "But once inside you'd never find the Commissioner. You don't know the building. I'll go with you."

"I couldn't permit that, your Highness," Slan objected. "Your life is too valuable to risk."

"What . . ." Loong flashed, but Savage interrupted.

"He's right," he said. "You'll have to remain on board the *Agreeet*."

"I will go in your stead, your Highness," Slan said firmly.

"Very well," said Loong unhappily.

"I will make the arrangements," said Slan. "We will use number seven scout."

He excused himself and left the group, while Loong turned to Savage.

"I am beginning to understand why we have not been able to completely subdue your people. Tell me, what is your Terran name?"

Savage told him.

"I have studied one of the Terran languages a bit—English, I believe it is called—and it seems that your name is also a word. What does it mean?"

"Untamed," Savage said.

"Aha!" said Loong.

At this point Slan returned.

"We will be in position to launch the attack shortly," he said. "We had best make ready. I beg your pardon, but the lady seems to have disappeared."

"So she has," said Loong after glancing around. "Well, we can't look for her now."

They took another car to their scout ship and exchanged their uniforms for more efficient fighting suits; black coveralls, crash helmets, respirator masks and battle packs.

They were each provided with a heat gun and a blaster, but Savage strapped the little needle gun to his wrist over the coverall sleeve.

"For sniping," he explained.

Loong held out his hand.

"Good luck," he said, and Savage remembered the General.

V

THE attacking fleet, the medium fighter and twelve scouts, roared in over the city and blaster fire came up to meet them. They passed through the wall of flame with the loss of only one scout and then they opened up with their own weapons. The only effect of their combined fire was to make the invisible force screen protecting their target flash and flare.

They made a second pass. Two more scouts went down and Savage decided that they too crashed. He manipulated the controls and the scout lurched sickeningly and went into a steep dive.

At the last possible moment Savage pulled out and, barely off the streets, roared between the buildings toward Supreme Headquarters. He slowed as they approached the building and rested one hand lightly on the bank of blaster studs.

"Brace yourself, we're going in," he said and slammed down on the studs. A chunk of wall in front of them disintegrated and he decelerated savagely. They went through the gap at dead low speed, but still they crashed through two inner walls before they finally stopped. They were bruised and shaken, but otherwise unhurt.

"Here's where we get out," Savage announced and Lathana's voice came from behind them.

"Wait for me," she cried and they whirled around.

From somewhere she had gotten a suit of coveralls that were almost the right size, as well as a helmet and mask. Two blasters were belted to her slim waist and the whole effect was one of efficient deadliness, spoiled only by the loveliness that insisted on making itself known through the coveralls.

"What are you doing here?" Savage finally got out.

"I wanted to help you," she said simply.

"What are we to do?" asked Slan. "We surely can't leave her here."

"She'll have to come with us. Let's go," Savage said, there was no time for argument or recrimination.

He kicked open the hatch and jumped down to the rubble covered floor. Flames were already crackling behind the ship as

he helped Lathana alight, and when Slan had joined them he blasted their way through the wall into a corridor.

With Slan in the lead they ran to the levitor bank. They had just reached it when a pair of doors slid open and black-uniformed men poured out, only to be cut down bloodily by Savage's blaster. The carnage lasted only a few moments and then they were in the levitor.

"Czako's offices are on the forty-fifth floor," Slan explained as he pressed the stud. "They will be thick with his men, of course."

Savage nodded grimly, his weapons ready, and watched the moving indicator. Then, as the forty-third floor clicked by and they were bracing themselves for the rush, a muffled blast rocked the building. The lights went out and they were hurled to the floor as the car stopped abruptly. Then they began to fall.

For an agonizing moment they felt helpless, doomed. Then the safety brakes went on and the car ground to a halt.

"What happened?" Lathana gasped.

"The fire must have gotten to the scout's fuel or blaster magazine and it blew up," Savage said. "But we've got to get out of here."

Slan produced a hand torch while Savage tried to open the doors.

"They're jammed," he said after a moment's effort. "Stand back, I'll use a blaster."

The car filled with heat and smoke and the stink of burning metal came through their masks. Finally he had a man-sized opening and he stuck his head out cautiously. A blaster bolt from down the hall gashed the door above his head and he recoiled.

"Burn a hole through the back while I keep them busy," he ordered and he felt reflected heat from behind him as he filled the hall outside with flame.

A few minutes later he heard Slan whisper from close behind him, "Everything is clear on the other side and Lathana is on guard. As soon as I finish this we can get out of here."

Alternating his attention between the hall and Slan, Savage watched him set a block charge booby-trap with practiced efficiency. Then he was finished and they stepped over the trip-wire and out of the levitor.

THEY ran across the room and as they went through the door a blaster roared behind them, Slan screamed and fell, only his momentum carrying him around the angle of the door jamb. Savage whirled to return the fire and then the block charge erupted and was thrown against a desk.

Protected by the wall Larhana was already at Slan's side as Savage picked himself up. Vainly she was trying to staunch the flow of blood from the clean-cut stumps that were all that remained of Slan's legs.

Savage quickly took two pieces of Plastro-graft from his kit and with them sealed the stumps as Slan ground out between clenched teeth, "You've got to get Czako." He struggled to get up, but fell back into Larhana's arms, sweat glistening on his face.

"We'll take care of you first," Savage said.

"Get Czako," Slan gasped. "Take the stairs. . . Room five leads to office. . . Armored door, use block charge. . . Three blocks. . . Hurry, hurry. . ."

His voice trailed off to nothingness and he died.

Larhana's green eyes were blazing as they cautiously traversed the offices.

At the forty-fifth floor Savage tried the door. It opened and then the frame splintered under the impact of a heavy needle gun. They dropped to the floor, leaving the door ajar. He held his heat gun and blaster together and quickly shoved them through the opening toward the unseen gun and pressed the studs. They roared and a scream answered.

Still on the floor, he twisted his weapons around and bathed the hall with flame in the other direction. Then he scrambled to his feet and with her dancer's agility Larhana followed him. Behind the flame of his weapons they ran down the scarred hall and found office five.

Savage took no chances; he used the blaster on the door and his heat gun was on as they went in. The room's furnishings were reduced to charred ruins, as were the three guards, but after the draperies and papers were consumed there was nothing left to burn.

"Keep your eyes on the door while I get the charges ready," Savage ordered.

He went to the armored door set into the opposite wall and carefully taped on the block charges. Then he set and connected the igniter.

Returning to Larhana, he said, "We don't have much time now. Cover me while I toss a couple of charges down the hall. As soon as they go off, run across to that other office and get under cover."

Quickly he prepared two more charges, setting the igniters for contact. He threw one and it had not yet exploded when he threw the second. The roaring double blast shook the floor and ferro-concrete dust filled the hall. Behind a sheet of flame they raced across the hall. Then, sheltered behind the wall, they waited for the next blast.

Savage was ready to believe that something had gone wrong with the igniter when the roaring thunder came. The rolling concussion lifted them and then slammed them with cruel violence to the floor. They lay dazed for a long moment before they were able to get up and return to office five. This time there was no interference.

The charge had blown in the heavy door and crushed under it was a twisted needle gun and its crew. Of the five other men in the room, only one seemed capable of movement. He made a feeble effort to raise his blaster and Savage cut him down.

They found High Commissioner Czako dazed and bleeding behind his huge desk. Savage hauled him roughly to his feet and jabbed the blaster into his middle.

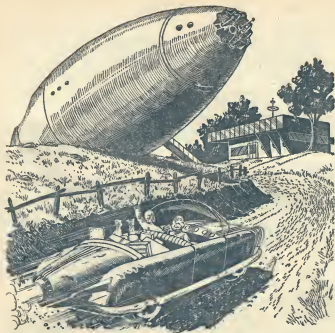
"You're finished, Czako," he said. "Get on the radio and tell your men to lay down their arms."

Czako nodded in bitter defeat.

IT WAS three Trygonian months later when His Highness, Emperor Kalnor met Savage and Larhana at the great spaceport. Above them loomed the *Agreet*, ready to depart on its voyage through hyper-space to Terra.

"We'll be back someday," Larhana promised.

"Yes," agreed Savage. "I'm as much Trygonian now as Terran, but we want to see Terra on the road to complete reconstruction first. A lot of prejudices will have to be overcome, but in time it will be done."



SALES TALK

By H. F. CENTE

Bennett, the salesman, gave a lot of thought to a world that was going to the dogs. But he gave more thought to the Cosmic salesman who could make it a reality.

THERE are two things to know about a salesman, the first being that his present job is just to tide him over until the position he is really fitted for comes along.

Big Bill Bennett was no exception to this first rule.

Nor was he an exception to the second, of which more later.

Just back from the Moon on a block selling assignment, he lounged into his branch office an hour late and told his boss that, though it hurt his unmarred conscience to quit when the whole corporation would

feel the loss, this was it.

His boss, who knew that Bill was as indispensable to Always-Stitch Sewing Machines as a bent needle, pretended great sorrow and wanted to know what Bill was going to do.

"Well," said Bill, throwing it at him, "I'm going into the future. I've inherited a time-machine."

"An alarm clock, no doubt?"

"Don't be funny," said Bill, emptying his pockets and dropping half-used spools of thread, zipper feet, needles, tension disks and stray parts of machinery on the desk. "You know that uncle of mine, the one that died a few weeks ago—"

"Oh. Yeah. He hated your guts."

"Oh, no, he didn't. That was just a front. Deep down, he must have admired my intelligence, even when I argued with him about his screwball ideas."

Bill smiled modestly.

"He left everybody else nothing but money. Me he left the time-machine. Molly and I and the foxes are going into the future about two million years—and we aren't coming back."

That'll show him what I think of him and his stupid sewing machines.

The boss didn't believe the story about the time-machine. Still, no harm in kidding the dope along.

"Aw, come on, Bill. The world isn't that much of a mess."

"Not yet," said Bill, with all the ominous portent he could muster. "The planets are arsenals, Spaceships loaded with weapons and men, Earth is liable to be blown off the map anytime. We're getting out, me, Molly and the foxes."

The boss had never seen Bill so worked up, even after he'd muffed a sale. "So the world is going to the dogs," he mused. Then he grinned. "I bet you wish it would go to the dogs."

"Not a bad idea," said Bill morosely. "They'd do a heck of a lot better than man ever did."

The boss said cautiously, "What does Molly think about this?"

"The wife?" Bill's eyes glazed. "Oh. She does anything I want her to."

The boss went through the amenities. He shook hands warmly. "I don't know how

we'll ever get a man to replace you—"

"Yeah, I realize that—"

"—I'd like to sell you on the idea of coming back—"

"Nobody's enough of a salesman for that."

"—but maybe it'll all turn out for the best!"

"You're darn right. I'll never look at another sewing machine the rest of my life."

BILL paled when Molly packed her featherweight sewing machine with their belongings.

"Aw, honey!" he expostulated, cradling her beautiful blonde fluffy head with one arm while his other gripped the yelping bundle of activity that was his wire-haired fox-terrier, Is. "We won't need a sewing machine where we're going. Somewhere in the next ten thousand years we'll find a civilization where nobody does any work, where the whole world is one great big lawn—"

"You're always so certain of yourself, Bill," said she, cocking a pert blue adoring eye up at him. "And you're so certain of that time-machine."

"Why not? Unk and I took a trip in it before he died. It works."

Was, the other fox-terrier, came rocketing red-tongued into the room, stayed a moment, and plummeted madly out the open door.

"Oh, don't think for a minute that I don't think you know what you're doing," said Molly. "It's just that I can't imagine why Unk was so nice to you after those things you said—calling him a fussy old man who couldn't even invent a good excuse to die—"

Bill interrupted hastily. "That was just one of our friendly arguments," he protested. "Nope, Unk loved me like a son. Dope that I am, now I can see it." His eyes watered. "I'm sorry he's dead—almost. Anyway, the sewing machine is out. Where is Was?"

"He was here. He isn't. Is is. I wish you'd put her down, Bill. She's clawing me. That'll give you two arms for me."

Bill hurriedly released Molly, holding the tongue-lolling dog against his chest. Is licked his nose affectionately. Bill grinned.

"What a fox," he exulted. "A good lean head and a quick dark eye," as the poem goes."

"Well," Molly said, "I only hope it doesn't get cold where we're going. I was thinking of making some special little jackets for Is and Was, but—"

"Just a minute," said Bill, giving her a quick, severe little kiss. "Who said we weren't going to take the machine? But keep it out of my sight!"

Their possessions being meager, their bank account non-existent, the Bennetts were able to load everything into a jalopy rocket-car that took the curves at a meager seventy per hour.

When they arrived at the sagging Connecticut farm where Unk had puttered around with mostly useless inventions the last few years of his life, they immediately saw the reclining hulk of the spaceship in the yard. It looked like a brown cigar with the end bitten raggedly off.

"Neat, huh?" said Bill. "The time-machine is hooked in with the spaceship controls. We can move in space as well as time."

As soon as the car rocketed to a sputtering stop before the airlock entrance, Was was a furry streak of black and white as he leaped from the car. Is stayed, red tongue lolling, eyes bright. Bill laboriously fished the ship combination slip out of his pocket. Then the Bennetts and Is unloaded from the car, gathered up Was, and they went inside the ship.

It was a good, solid ship, no question of that.

"And it's big," cried Molly. "There must be a dozen compartments. And libraries, Bill!"

"Yeah," said Bill in awe. "Wonder what's the idea? Unk left enough books to last anybody a lifetime. And here's a matter-converter!"

He stood over the matter-converter, fascinated. There was a large filing cabinet giving the matrix combinations for making almost anything. Even a combination-recipe for dog food!

"I did Unk dirt by treating him the way I did," Bill said lazily. "All the while, he had nothing but affection for me."

"A deep freeze," yelled Molly from the galley. "Enough real meat to last twenty years if we space it out with artificial proteins from the converter. Why, Bill, we could live here the rest of our lives if we wanted to—

just in this spaceship."

The dogs skittered happily around his heels as he wandered dazedly toward the sound of her voice and got a special arm-squeeze around her special-made waist.

"We can go anywhere we want to," he marveled. "Up and down time, up and down the Solar System. We could spend our lives in comfort. Unk's supplied us with everything—record-player, tape-recorder, transcriber, dictaphone, shaver. We're set, Molly! Let's unload the car and get into the next century—for a starter."

"HATCHES batted down," reported sailor Molly with a smart salute some two hours later. "Main sail keel-hauled—or sumpin'."

Bill grinned, but it was a strained grin.

"Man the lifeboats," he quipped back, a bit too inappropriately, because Molly paled. Bill squeezed her hand reassuringly, then turned his attention to the chrono-controls. He threw in the power. A dark vibration swept through the room, robbing the light of some of its intensity.

"That's normal," Bill said hastily, but Molly said "Ooh!" and shuddered against him, while Is and Was sat on their prize-winning hindquarters and whined uncomfortably.

Bill was feeling goose pimples himself. He watched the tubes proceeding through their changes of color. He set the pointer. When the tubes glowed a full violet, he threw the contact-switch down hard.

What happened, he reflected later on when he woke up, shouldn't happen even to the manager of a sewing machine branch office.

First, just before the universe turned hazy white and then quite black, Bill saw one tiny tube on the panel explode in a flash of yellow.

Second, the pointer, which indicated years, centuries, and millenia on an advancing logarithmic scale, snapped to its top position. This meant that the ship was flinging into the future at some fantastic rate measured in millions of years per ship-second.

When Bill staggered wildly erect it was because Was was running madly around the room, tail pointed down, blocky wiry head sniffing along the floor. Is was anxiously

licking his face. The wall chronometer told him thirty minutes had passed. Thirty times sixty is eighteen hundred. Eighteen hundred times. He glanced at the pointer and mentally retched.

"Down Was," he ordered groggily. Was huddled to the deck, looking at him with imploring wet eyes. Just then Molly sat up, rubbing her eyes sleepily.

"Something's wrong!" she said.

"Now, now, now, don't worry," Bill chattered, helping her up. "I'll fix it."

"That pointer says," said Molly, pointing while her eyes got wider and wider.

"Look," implored Bill feverishly. "Why don't you go ahead and get your sewing room set up. Take Is. Take Was. I'll fix it!"

Molly stepped to the port. "Oh!" she said, stepping back. "It's—it's shimmering violet. Nothing else. Bill—I'm sick—"

He caught her, holding her helplessly. He should let her drop and fix the time-machine. Instead he carried her to the bedroom, got her under the covers, chafed her wrists. Her eyes opened.

"I'll fix it!" he said desperately. He went back to the instrument room. He didn't dare look through the port, as Molly had. He tried to put the mechanism in reverse, but the pointer stayed where it was. He rustled around in the parts cabinet and found a tube to replace the exploded one. It promptly blew out. The pointer stayed where it was, millions of years per second. How many millions of years? It didn't say.

He'd only wanted to go a hundred years into the future. He'd wanted to play safe. And then a tube blew out.

The truth came slowly. Then he sat back from the machine, staring at it. Then he started giggling. He was still giggling when he went into the bedroom and woke Molly up.

"Molly," he shouted. "It's Unk. Don't you get it? This is his way of getting back at me. He *was* nuts. He geared the machine so the control tube blew out. We can't go back. All we can do is keep going ahead—toward the heat-death!"

Is jumped lightly onto the bed, bracing her stiff-furred paws on Molly's chest. Was tore into the room, looked around and—was. Molly affectionately patted Is on her

well-placed shoulders, put the other hand firmly over Bill's mouth to shut him up.

"Well, why not?" she said reasonably. "We can live on this ship the rest of our lives. Eternity's a long time, Bill. Just you, me, the dogs and—" she broke into a grin—"a pup or two!"

IT DIDN'T turn out so bad at that. Molly had always been a self-sufficient, perky little blonde, well able to live with herself. Bill's dislike of civilization turned out to be a built-in part of his personality. He didn't miss people. He didn't miss shows. He didn't miss phony excitement. It was quite a discovery that he was perfectly content reading, puttering, making love to Molly, taking care of the foxes.

He did have a couple heart-qualms when he dared to think about the condition of the universe. Not that there was much to be seen outside the ship. Apparently they were accelerating into time at an enormous rate, so fast, indeed, that individual celestial bodies could not be observed.

Relative to the ship, the universe was vibrating fast enough to produce sensations of color. It started at violet. At present it was a shattering yellow that hurt the eyes to look at. When these color effects moved down the scale to infra-red—?

Maximum entropy? The heat-death of the universe? He wondered.

"So what?" he asked Molly when his mood became lighter. "By this time Earth and all the planets and the Sun and every other star and constellation and galaxy is dust. Less than dust, maybe. Maybe we're near the end of time, when all the matter in the universe is broken down into nothing but pulses of energy. Maybe the pulses will get to the place where there isn't even any pulse anymore. When all energy is distributed equally over all of space. When there's no motion at all. What are you doing, Molly?"

Molly was smiling to herself. She was on her knees, fitting a fancy frilled checked-wool jacket over Is. Bill stared thunderstruck while she buttoned it down the length of Is' spine.

"There!" said Molly, standing back and giggling. "I made it on the sewing machine. Is gets so cold sometimes she shivers. She

drags around. I think she's going to have pups."

Bill grinned broadly. He fell to his knees, crooning at the bright-eyed dog. "Pups!" he exclaimed. "She sure is."

Was scampered into the room, his tail set high. He examined Is with considerable disapproval, then, being a highly sensitive dog, tried to make his getaway. "Oh, no you don't!" yelled Molly, diving for him. She caught him by the hind leg and hauled out her tape measure. Personally Bill commiserated with Was, but, knowing Molly, he gave up, went for the refrigerator, and threw Is a bone with plenty of meat on it.

"Bill!"

Molly was in a nightmare. She screamed Bill's name. He was out of bed in zero time, had her in his arms.

"Honey, what's the matter? You screamed!"

She clutched at him. Her heart was beating rapidly. He could feel it pounding away through her silk nightgown. For a moment all she did was moan, then she relaxed, breathing unevenly.

"What a horrible dream!" But—but Bill, it didn't seem like a dream. I dreamed I heard a voice—a skittering, ghastly voice, the voice of an old crotchety man trying to talk fast—like Unk—"

Like Unk.

Bill's throat grew something big in it. Fear. He whispered huskily, "Was it Unk? Are you sure it was a dream?"

She eased back against the pillow. "I haven't been feeling good," she sighed. "Maybe—I don't know what to think. Bill, lie down beside me. Let's listen together."

Listen. Listen to Unk? But Unk was dead. Maybe Unk's ghost. . .

It couldn't be Unk. So what was there out here beyond the ship in a pointless universe? He lay down with her, goose pimples all over his big body.

Then he heard it, and every square inch of his skin got the blue chills. His body seemed to lose identity and floated buoyantly in a sea of horror. A voice. A voice, gnarled with age, high and angry, spoken so fast, like a speeding phonograph record, that the words could not be made out.

That ghostly running stream of inartic-

ulated words came from nowhere, blatted in from everywhere. Birthed inside their heads, grew in demanding volume from outside the ship. A voice that pervaded space, that pulsed like a yammering animal gone mad, that hooted sometimes like a locomotive lost on a whirling track.

"It's Unk," Bill chattered. "I know it's Unk. Somehow he's followed us here. He's after me, Molly. After all the dirt I did him. His ghost."

"Silly." She put her cold palm on his mouth. Is came running down the corridor. She jumped into Bill's arm, shivering. She was frightened, Bill almost sobbed.

"Damn that Unk! If he makes Is lose her pups—"

After awhile he lay down again, drawing the covers over him, Is under one arm, Molly warm under the other. In the darkness somewhere, Was sniffed rather unconcernedly around the room.

All night they listened to the Voice's peevish mutter.

Molly gripped his hand under the covers. "It's slowing down. I made out a word then. It sounded like—like dogs. Bill, it's not Unk. I'm sure of that."

Bill went nuts. "That makes it worse," he yelled, jumping out of bed. "If it isn't Unk, who is it? There isn't anybody out here. There aren't any suns, any planets, any nothing. Who would be out here?" He paced the room, pulling at his hair. Then abruptly he climbed back in bed, shivering and mortally scared. And listening. . .

On bumbled the Voice. Speeding. Slowing. Sometimes seeming to catch up with their thought processes, then going past.

"He's trying to synchronize," said Molly quietly. He's going nuts doing it. He's getting madder and madder. This is liable to go on for days. I'm going to get up and fix breakfast."

After she left, Bill mentally told the Voice to go to hell, and fell asleep. Was climbed all over him a half hour later to let him know breakfast was ready.

The Voice had stopped.

"WHAT a couple mutts we were," Bill told Molly. "Letting our imaginations run haywire."

"Oh, I agree with you," said Molly, being

agreeable as usual. "We imagined it all, didn't we, Is?" Is wagged her prize-winning tail in agreement.

Bill squirmed. "Well," he protested, "Is was just cold. We imagined she was scared. Just like I imagined it was Unk. My guilty conscience. And you weren't feeling so good in the first place. Nice setup for a fancy group hallucination."

Molly was pressing a house-dress energetically and just smiled at him. Bill muttered about the obstinacy of the female mind and ladled out a generous helping of artificial dog food he'd synthesized from the matter-converter. Is stuck her pink tongue greedily into the mess.

Was looked idly on. Not baving any unborn pups to feed. Was wasn't hungry. But suddenly Was looked up at Bill and barked once, sharply. At the same time, Is beautiful dark eyes became anxious. She started to shiver. She cowered. Bill blanched. He scooped up Is, holding her against his chest. Molly stopped ironing.

"What is it, Bill?"

"Don't get scared," he chattered. "It's coming back. The dogs heard it. Maybe they're tuned a little higher than we are. Honey, it wasn't imagination. HERE IT COMES!"

It came. A blatting, vocalized anger that trembled the ship. Molly was somehow in Bill's arms, Is for once forgotten. And the Voice came clear, the angry, peevish muttering of an old man.

"Stupid bits of living matter. Eons have I tried to reach their low thinking level. They are incapable of responding. Best to destroy them."

"Bill! Answer him!"

Bill ran his tongue around the inside of his parched mouth. "Uh—" he said. "Wait a minute, Unk. I mean Voice. We hear you."

The Voice, who most assuredly could not be Unk, went wild. It skittered, it slid, it throbbed with unholy excitement. Then it came back, roaring. "Why did you not answer me, insignificant creatures?"

"Uh—" said Bill, sweating.

"Answer me! Do you dare to ignore me, the Supreme, the Only Intelligence in the universe?"

"Well," said Bill, glassy-eyed. "That is, there doesn't seem to be much to say—"

"NOT MUCH TO SAY!"

The Supreme Intelligence went into a spin.

"I shall destroy you, do you understand me, you insignificant accretions of matter? How dare you exist? Know you that matter disappeared billions of years ago. You do not belong in this universe!"

Bill blinked. He met Molly's anxious glance. Then something made him grin. His lips moved. "He's as crotchety as Unk was. I can handle him."

Molly's lips smiled tremulously in agreement.

Bill said brazenly to the Voice, "I am, therefore I am—if you've read your Descartes. In other words, we're here, so we belong. Sell me something else." He waited for the lightning bolt. It didn't come.

"Descartes? Sell? Speak plainly, stupid creature. Or are you incapable of true thought? That would be the final irony. After slowing my thought-rate down over eons of time. To find that you cannot think! Yet, what else could I expect of your intelligence, hampered by its envelope of living matter?"

"We can think, Voice," Bill offered. "What did you—?"

"SILENCE!" The word roared out furiously. "How dare you question me, the Pervader of all, the Only Entity? Do you wish to be destroyed?"

"You're going at this wrong," Bill said doggedly. "You're trying to sell me something. First of all, you get the customer's confidence, after a manner of speaking. You sell yourself first, see?"

Molly nodded vigorously, her hand over her mouth, her eyes sparkling with repressed glee. *You're going at it right, Bill.* Bill's shoulders went back. He was still scared stiff but he threw himself in full blast.

"Just let me give you a hint, Voice," he said. "We're a couple cooperative pieces of matter. But you ain't said nuthin' that makes us like you. Sell us."

"SPEAK," said the Voice sternly. "Where are your thoughts? They have faded. Or is it that my strength is failing so that I cannot pick up your lower-order vibrations? Speak, I command you!"

Bill darted a flurried look at Molly. He

repeated himself to the Voice, shouting. Back came the Voice, outraged.

"Your thoughts buzz. You are seeking to evade me. I shall destroy you!"

Bill looked desperately around. "Something's wrong!" he told Molly. "Where's Was?"

"He was," said Molly, looking under tables.

"Get him back!" Bill sweated. "Hurry. We still haven't got the Voice where we want him. He's liable to get mean." Distractedly, he started aft, holding the unhappy close to his chest. Molly fell into running step beside him.

"But why?" she asked anxiously. "What's Was got to do with it?"

"Speak," cried the Supreme Intelligence. "Your time is short unless you continue communication. You dare—" Vituperation. Outrage. Bill broke into a run.

"It's the dogs," he yelled at Molly. "I can't think of any other reason we'd break contact. Dogs have a high psychic sense. The way they can find their way home. The way they howl when somebody dies. Intuition. Sampin'. I don't know. But they sensed the Voice coming back before we ever did. Our thoughts are heterodyning through their telepathic level. Like a radio beam. When Was went out, half the power of the beam failed. Get it?"

"Oh, sure," Molly yelled back. "And you throw algebra at me when we're on the brink of death!" She darted ahead, pleading for Was to come out from wherever he was. Was came out readily enough and jumped into Molly's arms and apparently was perfectly willing to continue as part of the hookup.

"All right, Voice," Bill said unsteadily. "We're back." He held his breath. Maybe he was right. Maybe he was wrong. But the Voice came in, drenching them with anger, but with ample evidence that communication had been reestablished.

"Once more," it said sternly, "and you shall be obliterated for having so impolitely intruded upon my meditation."

"We intruded on *him*," Bill muttered.

"Now, matter, let me speak of myself. Know you that I am the only entity that exists, if I exclude your puny selves. I am thought. I am intelligence. I was born un-

uttered ages ago, when thinking life first appeared.

"I could be called pure life force—theta. But that theta was trapped by matter, enturbulated by it. As matter disappeared, Theta was freed from its entrapment, and I, the Supreme Entity, came into greater and greater ego-awareness."

The Voice ebbed abruptly, then came back with a frightened roar.

"My strength is being drained! The millions, the billions of years are passing. I am aging! How hard it is to maintain communication with your low order of intelligence."

"But I must speak, and I must receive your answers, even though — fury — your own voices are like growls and whines, and even though the psychons of my being are inevitably disintegrating. Know you, matter, that once this disintegration is complete I shall—die."

"Sympathy gag," Bill's lips formed for Molly's benefit. "If we don't watch our step from now on, this guy can sell us anything."

To the Intelligence he said cautiously, "Now maybe you're getting to the point. What's your product? What are you trying to sell?"

"Product? Sell?" Then the Voice swelled up. "THE UNIVERSE! That is my product, that is what you shall buy—or be destroyed!"

"Now listen well. I shall not be able to repeat. When I die—" the Voice dwelt on the words with an exquisite sadness that would have wrenched the heart of anybody but a hardened salesman—"the universe will have come to that state you know as the heat-death."

"No motion—and no source of motion! For eons I have brooded on this sadness. And now I have discovered YOU!"

"You, matter, shall resurrect the universe."

Is was lying still, Bill's strong fingers rubbing her absently behind the fluffy ears. Something churned abruptly in Bill's stomach.

Resurrection. Turn back the universe, and give me yesterday. . . . He paled. Atom bombs, space fleets bristling with men for slaughter and weapons for slaughtering. Poverty. Misery. Kids in tenements without lawns.

"What do you mean by resurrection,

Voice?" The question came from the very bottom of Bill. "Would the old universe come back? Our planet Earth? The other planets?"

"Yes, yes! I would arrange it. A matrix sheeted four-dimensionally about the universe—which is myself. A matrix through which all re-created motion would pass. Your Earth would be remade—"

"With all human emotions," said Bill casually.

"Exactly! You shall aid in resurrecting the universe. I have had your answer!" Delirious joy flamed through the Voice's being. "Now I shall tell you how the marvellous occurrence can be brought about!"

Molly was looking at Bill with tears in her eyes.

"Don't you want it, Bill?" she whispered. "The way it was? Some of it was beautiful."

"Some of it," said Bill grimly. "You—and I—and Was—are the only beautiful things I ever got out of it. But let him talk."

THE Voice was already talking at a furious, excited pace. Bill would wait until the time-machine carried them to the very end of entropy. To the heat-death of the universe where all particles were in a state of absolute rest.

"Do you not see it? It is only necessary to recreate motion. Start the process over again. How? You have atom-powered motors aboard your ship. The jets of your ship will spew out what are, in comparison with the particles of my composition, solid particles. Gamma rays. Gravikons. Protons. Electrons. Neutrons.

"When you have exhausted your fuel, you will convert more in your matter-converter. You will strip the ship, if necessary. Everything must go to supply the necessary energy of motion.

"Motion," went on the Voice deliriously. "The universe will once again surge with the motion you have created. Around the loosed particles atoms and molecules will form. They will grow—eventually, as you speed through time, turn into hot suns, flaming nebulae. Planets will be born as the billions of years pass. One of them will be Earth! And Earth will again result in life. Your kind of life. And your kind of life will be

master of all other life.

"And of course," the Intelligence added as an apologetic afterthought, "it will result in myself."

Bill sat up, mouth falling open. "So that's it!" he yelled. He gaped at Molly. "That's what he's been beating around the bush for. To bring about his own resurrection after he dies!"

He burst out laughing. "So you want the same cycle to start all over again, Voice. Because, you, as *theta*, as the life-force, will be born again, and eventually will come to full resurrection as the universe again dies.

"Reincarnation!"

"But I'm not sold, see? Get a better sales argument. Molly and I are happy here. We can spend our whole lives on this spaceship and get along famously."

The Voice moaned like an animal in pain. Indeed, its energy of life, whatever that was, seemed to be fading.

"Dying," said the Voice hollowly. "I am dying. To know that one's self will exist no more, not even in a future life. And it would be so easy for you!"

A note of cunning, like an old man hatching schemes to outwit hard youth.

"Matter, I would tell you how to repair your time-mechanism so that you could control your forward flight."

"No sale!" snapped Bill.

"You could stop at whatever point on the newly created Earth you chose. Think of it! I offer you variety, when there might well be monotony!"

"We'll get along," said Bill wearily. "You haven't even got your foot in the door."

Molly tugged imploringly at his arm. "Bill, you might really like it better in the long run. I wish—"

The Voice roared in with new energy, now that it was being backed up.

"Yes!" it roared. "Your mate—your mate—ah!"

Silence, seething with unuttered thought, as if that dying mind were skittering about the ship, exploring, discovering great wonders with its strange senses. The feeling of privacy being invaded was so strong with Bill that he broke loose.

"No!" he yelled. "And that's final. GET OUT OF HERE!"

But then the Voice started laughing. Crotchety, giggly laughter. Then it spoke again, with unholy cunning.

"Matter," it whispered mockingly, "you *shall* buy my product, to use your own lower-level method of communicating. For, matter, what are you going to do for green grafts on this spaceship? For trees? For Sunday schools? For bones buried in soft loam to be dug up later? For big ice cream cones and long runs in the woods after rabbits? For the thrill of snow on your paws and football games and Boy Scout hikes and the sheer joy of howling at the Moon at night?"

"Huh?"

"Matter," said the Voice cunningly, "your mate is going to have pups!"

Bill darted an amazed glance at Molly. Molly's was looking back at him just as amazedly.

"I'm not, Bill," she said. "I know I'm not. He's crazy. He doesn't know what he's—"

Then she clapped a hand over her mouth, her eyes wide with sudden hysterical amusement. "Don't you get it, Bill," she choked. "He's mixed up. Is is going to have the pups!"

BILL got it. Suddenly everything clicked into place. The sheer insanity of it. The senility of it. And the utter beauty of it! He began to grin, the grin turned into a laugh, the laugh into something that was momentarily hysterical. Then he quieted.

"Molly," he said, "put Was down."

Molly dropped the dog. Was departed the room in a flash.

"The Intelligence can't hear us now," Bill explained.

Then he stood over Molly, gently clasping her shoulders in his big hands, and shaking her a little, with affection.

"Sweet Molly," he said wryly. "You really want the world back, don't you? But Molly, it's no good, it's no good the way it was. We can't have it that way again.

"But we can have a different order of things. And I'll stake my life that it'll be a better way.

"The Intelligence tipped us off, of course, when he said *you* were going to have the

pups. But, actually, *the Intelligence isn't talking to us!*"

Molly nodded gravely. "I know, Bill. That's the way it seems, doesn't it? Our thoughts are going through the dogs' heads."

"Yeah," Bill was almost musing to himself. "He's talking to the dogs—and thinks the dogs are talking back to him. He's old, Molly. He's crotchety and self-centered and probably senile. I doubt if he can really see us—only sense us—"

From somewhere the Voice was coming in, quetulous, demanding communication, but with fright dominant in its thought-tones. Molly and Bill paid no attention.

"The Intelligence made an easy mistake, for him. After all, in this ship are two sets of beings. Both with four legs. Both wearing clothes—those things you made for Is and Was." He grimaced amusedly. "And remember how he complained that our thought-voices seemed like growls and whines?"

"Well, he's mixed up. He's mistaken the dogs for the intelligences aboard this ship. His conception of material life is some weird combination of human and dog characteristics—but mostly dog.

"Therefore he's offered to arrange this matrix-thing he talks about so that dogs will evolve on the new Earth as the dominant, mastering life-form.

"How about it, Molly? Should we throw the universe to the dogs?"

Molly gave him one pointed look, then she stood on tiptoe and kissed him. "I always want what you want, Bill," she said tenderly. "I always do, somehow." Then she went aft, coaxed Was out from wherever he was, and came back with him licking her ear. The communication beam was in operation again.

"I cannot hear you," the Voice moaned weakly. "To lose contact, after I dissipate my life energy and go even nearer to death—"

Bill slipped his arm around Molly's waist. "We're here, Voice," he said gently. "You set up the matrix, the way you planned.

"You've made a deal."

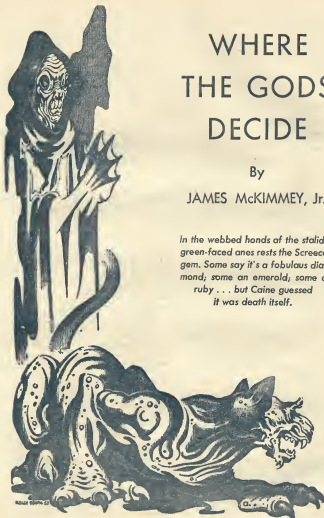
The second thing to know about a salesman? He's a fall guy for a good sales talk.

WHERE THE GODS DECIDE

By

JAMES McKIMMEY, Jr.

*In the webbed hands of the stolid,
green-faced ones rests the Scesce
gem. Some say it's a fabulous dia-
mond; some an emerald; some a
ruby . . . but Caine guessed
it was death itself.*





High above the wet plains and muggy jungles, above the slick rocks and shiny leaves, rests a temple. Like most shrines of ancient order its narrowing spires point to the sky. Men, Venusian men, walk quietly through the restricted labyrinth of this temple, green fingers webbed beneath the long sleeves of their gray capes; green faces expressionless beneath the sanctity of their gray hoods. There is movement, and these caped men circle a silver orb that lies in dead center of the golden walls. They pace, each flat step a soundless motion. The green fingers waxesb, spread, and come together again. "Screee," says a flute-like voice. "Screee," says another. The silver orb rests like a cloudy fast-sized tinzel globe, unsparking, while a dozen minds search out through the vastness of Venus, probing for the cores of evil and purity. Feet pace, faces are immobile, and through the thick air comes a shrill rising scream from the throat of a giant black cat with deep orange eyes. The motion ceases, lidless stares meet. "Gritb?" pronounces one. "Gritb?" pronounces another. And the pacing continues, while green lips quirk the slightest bit. Minds search . . .

IT WAS that season when the jungle of Venus turned into a vapid, steaming swamp. Sleet buds glistened like long, thin snakes, and leaves hung limp and wet from the vine-trees. Nicholas Caine felt the sweat prickle upon his forehead and slide down the sides of his face. Fairchild, he noticed, was sweating, too, so that the man's shirt had turned dark, and the close-clipped gray hair curled on his head. Only the woman still looked fresh in her white shirt and shorts.

She was standing beside Caine's jetcopter, drinking plain Scotch from a silver glass. Her husband, Fairchild, was drinking, too, as he sat silently in a folding chair beneath the tip of the ship's left wing.

This is going to be a sweet thing, Caine thought, it really is.

The air was dead of breeze, and soggy clouds hung above them like an immense stifling blanket. The man stared at his knees and the woman swirled the Scotch in her glass. Caine kept his palms flat against the arm rests of his chair.

He watched the woman closely. There was too much brightness inside of her, too much nervousness, as though she were burning inside and she had to keep moving, laughing, insulting, enticing, because she was alive with that burning, and she couldn't stop. It wasn't the liquor, Caine knew, because they had just started that, a few minutes after he had brought the ship down.

They were approximately four-hundred miles from the Colony, and in the wild stretches of this Venusian jungle, four-hundred miles was like the distance from day to night. Here was the dark, the strange, the weird and the wild.

Kiitz birds screamed in the distance, and their sound was like the sound a man makes when he is touched by fire. A thick, muddy river went over a cliff above and behind them, hitting transparent rocks with a steady crashing noise that thrummed against Caine's ears like thunder in a distant sky.

Teewh birds with black wings and curling yellow beaks came out of the sultry sky and skimmed the tips of the trees surrounding the clearing. They screeched when they dove, and they kept harmony with the unseen stationary kiitz birds. A chilling, nerve-racking harmony.

"WON'T you have a drink with us?" said the woman, her teeth white between her smiling lips.

"Thank you, no," Caine said. The woman tipped her head and watched him. Her eyes were very blue and they mocked Caine and taunted him, while her husband just sat there, drinking and watching his bare knees.

This could go to pieces in a hurry, Caine decided, and he rubbed his palms against the arms of the chair.

Because, on the other hand, the husband was too quiet, too brooding, too deliberately unseeing of the way his wife played with Caine, with her eyes and her movements.

Her legs, Caine noticed, were the kind that would look well bare, as they were, or in nylon beneath a skirt, and she had rather full hips, although not too full. Her breasts, Caine could see, were well enough developed.

She bent to rub a finger against her left knee. "Are there insects in this part of the jungle?" she asked Caine.

"Some."

"But no grith cats?" she said, straightening.

"Not here," Caine said.

"Just where we're going tomorrow?"

"Yes." Caine looked back to the man. He was about fifty, Caine judged, at least twenty years older than the woman. His face was lean and sad, and there were thin lines traveling out from the corners of his eyes and mouth that contrasted with the youthful cut of his wavy hair.

These two had come to Caine because his reputation in the Colony was established. He had been flying tourists into the jungle for more than three years, and while he could not predict all of this country, he at least knew the general traits of those sections within a reasonable radius of the Colony.

"Did you ever shoot a grith cat?" the woman asked, looking at Caine over her glass.

"No," said Caine.

"But you've heard that they're pretty horrible and dangerous?"

"Yes." Caine wiped a hand at the sweat on his forehead. The woman was working at the cats, her eyes shifting to look at her husband with every word, to see how he was reacting. So far he had done nothing, said nothing, only sat there and drank.

However, the cats were not the reason the couple were in the Venusian jungle. Hunting animals was a dead sport for them, something done in the past and something which had become boring.

They were looking for bigger game now. The Screece gem. And they had flown all the way from Earth to Mars, from Mars to Venus, to find it. The Screece gem was a myth, Caine was certain, a bit of fantasy out of ancient Venusian lore. But they paid him well for the trip, and he would ask no questions.

The woman stayed with the cats. "How big are these grith cats, Mr. Caine?"

"Eight to ten feet long," Caine said. "About like a large horse."

"Only they're cats, with the claws and the fangs and all."

"Essentially."

Caine felt himself tightening inside a little. The woman was trying to break

through her husband's armor, because somewhere, sometime, he must have had trouble hunting a cat-like animal. Tiger. Or panther. The Martian frynx, perhaps. But she had not found her target, yet.

The man raised his head and spoke for the first time since they had landed. "How far away is this temple, would you say, Mr. Caine?"

"Fifty miles," Caine said.

"How close to it can we land?"

"Eight or ten miles, I imagine."

"Can't we get closer than that?" the man asked.

"I don't think so," Caine said. "The temple is on top of a fairly sheer rise of land, and I can't put the ship down there. The nearest clearing we'll find will be about eight or ten miles away."

Mrs. Fairchild walked to her chair and sat down. "That means, then, that we'll have to go through that much country where the cats are?"

Caine didn't answer, and the man returned to gazing at his knees. Time moved slowly in the thick wet jungle.

"Show Mr. Caine your scar, Charles," the woman said, her voice sudden out of the silence.

Fairchild picked up his glass from the arm of his chair and held it tightly in front of his waist. The muscles along his bare forearms were ridged and his knuckles paled as he held the glass.

"Don't be bashful," the woman said, smiling. "I'm sure Mr. Caine would like to see what a cat can do."

She looked at Caine as though she were about to tell him a delightfully domestic story that had been, until now, nurtured between just her husband and her. "This was a leopard, Mr. Caine. A long vicious leopard. Mr. Fairchild, you see, didn't hit him right, and so he got Charles from about here," she tapped herself just below the neck, "to here." She touched her waist. "It's a long scar, Mr. Caine. Isn't it, Charles? About three inches wide, and..."

The man brought his glass down against the arm of the chair. "Shut up, Janet. I'll tell you nicely. Just shut up!"

"Charles," she said, blinking in exaggerated surprise. "I just wanted to tell Mr. Caine, because he's hunted, too, and while

I don't know if these grith cats are anything like leopards. . .

The man's eyes had become wide and angry. "I won't tell you again, Janet."

"I'm sorry, Charles." She smiled at him assuringly and blinked again. "We're just excited about tomorrow, I guess, aren't we?"

Fairchild returned his stare to his glass, noticed it was empty, and filled it.

"Can't I interest you in a drink, yet, Mr. Caine?" Mrs. Fairchild said.

"Not right now," Caine said.

"Oh." Her voice pouted. "But I think we should celebrate. Here Charles and I have come all this way to find the Screece gem, and we're sitting within fifty miles of it, and I think we all ought to celebrate."

FAIRCHILD spoke to Caine without raising his head. "Maybe Mr. Caine doesn't really believe in the existence of the Screece gem. Do you, Mr. Caine?" he said, looking up.

Caine took a cigarette from a package in his shirt. "I'm just paid to get you to a temple, not to think."

"You're evading the question," Fairchild said. His eyes were narrow now, and a bit glazed.

Caine lit his cigarette and blew smoke into the damp air. He kept his voice non-committal. "I've heard about it. Everybody in the Colony has heard about it."

"Correction," said Fairchild. "Everybody in the System has heard about it."

"It's a very popular myth," Caine agreed.

The man stood up. "It is not a myth, Mr. Caine. It exists and it's in that temple, do you hear me? There is no damned myth about it, just cold hard fact, and I'm going to find it and take it out of there! Is that clear?"

Caine watched the man's taut figure. He inhaled his cigarette. "I told you, Mr. Fairchild, I'm just paid to fly the ship and I'm not paid to think. I'm responsible for getting you to the temple. That's all."

"Listen," Fairchild said, crossing to Caine and reaching for the front of Caine's shirt. "Don't get insolent with me. . ."

Caine slapped the man's hand away.

"Charles!" the woman said.

The man blinched and touched his slapped hand against his chest. "Sorry, Mr. Caine,"

he said, finally. "Didn't mean to fly off that way. Little nervous, you see. All that time in space, searching around this way. We're just this close, and I'm getting too nervous." He turned back to his chair and sat down. His face became very sad again, and the lines about his mouth and eyes seemed deeper.

The woman laughed lightly. "You don't want to pay any attention to Charles when he's this way," she said to Caine. "It's just that this means so much to him, finding the Screece gem. It's worth the wealth of the System, they say, and so Charles has to have it, Mr. Caine. Because he hasn't got any more money."

"For heaven's sake, Janet," the man pleaded.

"Are you ashamed of being poor?" she asked with false concern. She stood up and began pacing back and forth, and Caine noticed the easy way she moved, her hips swaying, the muscles of her long legs rippling. "No, he's not ashamed of being poor," she said, looking at Caine. "He's afraid of it, aren't you, Charles?"

Fairchild tipped his glass to his lips, and when he brought it down, Caine could see that it was empty again.

The man refilled the glass and held it in front of him, looking into it, as though he might find another world there, a peaceful world, where there weren't any cats or beautiful women with reddish hair, a world where there might be peace and no fear. He raised the glass, trying to taste of that world. His eyes were getting filmy.

"I'll tell you why he's afraid of being poor, Mr. Caine," the woman went on. "It's because not only is Charles a yellow punk when it comes to cats, but he's frightened of losing his wife, aren't you, Charles?"

Caine felt himself tensing under the cutting lilt of the woman's voice. He was observing something, he knew, that should have been contained in the seal of marital privacy. But here he was, caught in the middle of it, while the woman swung back and forth, and the man seemed to crumple further into his chair, hanging on to the glass of Scotch, as though that were all he had left to hang on to.

And tomorrow they had ten miles of grith country to span on foot. Sweet, Caine repeated to himself, really sweet.

II

"CHARLES, you see," the woman said, stopping and turning to Caine, "thinks the only way he can hold me is with money. And now he's put every penny he had left into this hunt so that he can find the Screece gem and keep his lovely wife. And do you know what, Mr. Caine?" She placed her hands gently on her hips, and Caine could see the faintest swinging movement in them. "He's right, you see."

Caine remained very silent.

"He *has* to find the Screece gem," the woman said, smiling whitely, "or lovely Janet is gone, slipped right out of his hands. And Charles is just a poor little sheep with gray hair and a two inch scar, who'll be cold and alone, while Janet—"

"Stop it, damn it!" Fairchild said, but he didn't get up and his voice was thick.

"—while Janet," the woman said, her voice even and relentless, "will be sleeping with someone else who can afford her, and poor old Charles will shiver in his damned freezing bed, all alone, thinking about that, wondering who it is, burning up his ancient jealous liver!" The woman whirled to face her husband.

The man tightened both hands around his glass, and Caine could see the whiteness about his mouth. The woman began to laugh, a soft, pealing laugh that got into Caine's brain because of the very softness of it.

She walked back to her chair and lifted her own glass. Her laughter stopped while she drank, and then it started again. She turned to look at her husband, and her eyes danced and her lips curved. Her body shook with the laughter.

"Who do you think it'll be?" she asked her husband. "If you don't find the gem?" She turned to Caine. "Mr. Caine, do you have any money? I mean, perhaps you wouldn't need as much money as Charles. I might make some compensation for verility, you know."

Caine disregarded her. "Mr. Fairchild, we have some rugged country to cover tomorrow. This is your party, of course, but if you keep on drinking."

"If I keep on drinking?"

Caine examined the man's eyes and his

slack mouth. "Nothing," Caine said. "Nothing." At least, he decided, the Scotch might stop the needling and the pressure for the man. He deserved that much, perhaps.

"You didn't answer me, Mr. Caine," the woman said. "About you and me. I'd like you to answer, so that my husband knows before he falls out of his chair, you see."

"I think we all ought to get some sleep," Caine said quietly.

"Mr. Caine, really? So sudden? I'd have to check your bankbook first, of course. Although if you give me your word. . ."

"If you don't mind," Caine said, his voice harsh, "I'd like to be left neutral in whatever you and Mr. Fairchild might have in conflict."

"Oh," she said, "Well, that's just because you haven't seen the full potential. Let me show you what you'd be getting for your money—the way Charles saw it." She raised her glass again, drank, and stood up to cross to the ship. She climbed the ladder to the cabin, very gracefully, and touched the switch of the radio. Music pealed into the warm air.

It was minor music, issuing from the Colony station, music that had been taken from the native Venusian melodies. It had been converted and fitted to the heavy rhythm of Earth's ancient Africa, and it seemed suddenly to become a part of this jungle of Venus.

The woman stood in the doorway, and then she moved down the ladder, as though it were one sliding motion. She remained there, her back against the silver metal of the ship, swaying her hips, moving her shoulders.

"I was a dancer, you see, Mr. Caine. I worked in a very expensive club in Habrill, on Mars. I was very popular and very good, and sweet Charles took me away from it all, didn't you, Charles?"

Fairchild, Caine could see, was having trouble focusing his eyes, but the rhythmic music was heavy in the air and it beat against the ears, and Caine knew that the man was aware of what was happening.

The woman began moving easily toward Caine, her movement a practised swinging motion of hips and shoulders. "This is what Charles took me away from, Mr. Caine, by the gentle touch of gold," she said. "Come

with me," he said, and he fitted diamonds to my ears and rings to my fingers. 'Let me take you away from the damned searching eyes of every man on Mars. Let me hide you, so no one can see you or touch you, but me, and I'll give you all I own.' Isn't that right, Charles?" she said, looking at him with narrow gleaming eyes.

The man lifted his glass and slowly drained it. He let it fall to the ground with a breaking crunch, while the woman kept time with the rhythm, with her hips and her shoulders, slight swinging motions that nly intimated.

"Only now," the woman said, "poor Charles doesn't have anything more to give, and so here I go again. . . ."

She raised her hands over her head and cracked her palms together. Her hips swung and her shoulders shook. She caught her fingers in her hair, her teeth white and biting, while her whole body shivered. It was a rippling gyration of muscle and pink skin, building, furious.

Fairchild pushed himself out of the chair. His eyes were wild and vacant. "Don't. . ." he said, and his words were meshed together so that it was a hoarse sound, full of anguish.

The woman laughed, a wild laugh that blended with the music and the frenzied movement of her body. She whirled and slapped her hands together and her body quivered.

The man staggered a step forward. "Janet, don't, please. . ." He fell forward, sprawling over the ground. Gradually, the woman ceased her movement, while her laughter rang through the wet jungle.

The gray-caped figures hold motionless around the muddy silver orb. A green head cocks. Another. The golden walls encase them, and only a circular opening near a tip of a spire brings in dim light and a little of the wispy outside vapor. Fingers disengage and a green extends from a gray cape. The hand sweeps in a downward slice, splitting by symbol, purity from evil. A second hand imitates. A third. A dozen. Voices flute to the cloudy orb. A cat snarls. Minds probe.

THE light was dimming, and she was a dark curving figure, standing over the crumpled figure of the man. The music

pounded relentlessly. Caine stood up.

"Each time I make one of these trips," he said, looking at the motionless form of Fairchild, "I promise myself it'll be the last, and I'm promising myself again, right now."

The woman stood silent, and there was just her smiling mouth and the white teeth and the reddish hair. "But this one isn't over, yet, Mr. Caine. We still have a long way to go." Her eyes danced.

"That's right, Mrs. Fairchild," Caine said, bending to lift the man. "Unfortunately, that's right."

He picked the man up while the woman watched, and he carried him to the ship. He climbed to the cabin, working against the surprising weight of the smaller man. For his age, Fairchild was a very tough, sinewy man who looked as though he had spent most of his life fighting through strange and varied wilds, constantly in search of new adventures and thrills.

Caine laid the man across a bunk built into the rear of the ship's cabin. The tip end of the wide scar was visible now, showing above Fairchild's open shirt, and the thin lines about the eyes and mouth were like written entries in his face, telling of too much Scotch and perhaps too much of the reddish-haired woman. All that he lacked, Caine thought wryly, was the empty bank account to show the price he had paid for the love of the devilish woman.

Caine straightened and walked back through the cabin, snapping off the radio.

He jumped to the ground. The light was very dim now, and the woman was only an outline. The screams of kiitz birds were in the air again, and in the distance, the thrumming monotony of the falls.

"You can use the cabin with your husband, Mrs. Fairchild," Caine said briskly. "I'll get some blankets and sleep out here."

"Aren't there animals?"

"Not around here," Caine said. "I'll make a fire. If you want something to eat I'll get it out of the cabin for you."

"No, thank you, Mr. Caine," the woman said, sitting down in her chair. "I'll just enjoy the rest of my drink, if you don't mind."

"It's up to you," Caine said shortly. He was very careful to keep his eyes away from

her. You handled a woman like that best, he knew, by keeping your eyes away from her.

He gathered wood from beneath the wet outer layer of the jungle floor. He bent to light the fire just as the darkness enveloped the clearing. The flames flickered and licked upward, sending their shifting yellow light into the surrounding foliage.

Caine straightened from the fire.

"Did you like my dance?" the woman asked, softly.

"I didn't see it for your husband, Mrs. Fairchild," Caine said, and he returned to the ship where he got several blankets. He placed them near the fire.

"He's not around now," the woman said.

Caine looked at her finally. "He is as far as I'm concerned."

"You're so noble, Mr. Caine."

"I'm not anything," Caine said. "I'm just a guide who gets paid for taking people where they want to go. Nothing more, do you understand, Mrs. Fairchild?"

"No," she said, smiling at him.

Caine walked to his chair and sat down. "We have a tough day ahead of us, Mrs. Fairchild, and we'll need all the strength we have to get through that stretch of jungle. This is a different jungle than you've seen before. Venus breeds some terrible country, and where we're going is that kind of country. I haven't been there myself, so I can't even predict what it'll be like. But I've circled it in the ship and it's thick and alive. I don't trust it. So you can stay up, if you like, and I'll be glad to stay awake myself, but I'd advise some sleep right now."

Mrs. Fairchild stood up slowly, her fingers drifting over her waist. "I'll tell you, Mr. Caine. You're not the kind of man I like to argue with. I've had just enough liquor to feel perfectly agreeable to anything, anyway. So I'll get ready for bed, but I'm sorry you didn't enjoy my dance. Let's do this. You wait while I get ready, and then we'll have one nightcap together, a sort of dancing nightcap. Are you interested, Mr. Caine?"

Caine lit a cigarette slowly, watching the blaze of his lighter. He snapped the lighter shut. "I'm interested in both you and your husband, Mrs. Fairchild."

"To hell with my husband," she said, her teeth showing between her lips. She lifted

her glass and drank all that was in it. "Relax, Mr. Caine," she said, walking toward the ship. "Enjoy yourself."

Caine noticed that the liquor had taken hold of the way she walked, so that she swayed a little, but there was still the grace there and the swing, and it was hard to disregard.

I hope she doesn't come out of there, Caine thought. I hope she just falls asleep and leaves me alone, and that tomorrow goes very quickly and smoothly.

BUT when Caine had watched the flames lick at the settling night for a few minutes and had finished his cigarette, he heard the sound again. The sound of music, muffled by the silver body of the ship. Wilder now, with heavier drums, seasoned into a more biting sound by the night and the flickering flames. Caine was aware of the blood in his veins and the pulse in his temples.

All at once, the door of the cabin was kicked open and the music rose in the air. The woman stood in the doorway, her hands gripping the silver frame tightly. She wore a black nightgown, made of shimmering stuff that was as thin as the fine mist in the air. Her hair had been let down and it fell over her shoulders and her back. Her feet were bare and very white beneath the black gown.

She stood motionless, her fingers tight against the frame, as though holding herself against the music. The melody disappeared then, and there was only the drums, rolling, and finding a punctuation that became all that existed in the night. The woman leaped from the doorway and she touched the ground, wriggling. Her feet were wide-spaced and her hands searched through her hair, lifting it from the nape of her neck. She bent forward suddenly, so that her hair was a reddish swirl against the light of the leaping flames.

She straightened slowly, one hand sliding her hair back, so that Caine could see her eyes dancing with her body, and she began moving toward him, shoulders swinging, hips pivoting. Caine kept his hands tight against the arms of his chair, his eyes narrow. The woman was a writhing movement beneath the black veil-like gown. She twisted and whirled and finally, she stopped in front

of Caine, chin high, one hand still half-thrust through the soft thick hair. Her eyes glowed.

"Nightcap," she said, her voice breathless.

Caine shifted carefully in his chair. "I'm not thirsty," he said.

The woman's hand snapped from her hair, and the relaxed suppleness of her body tightened.

"I remember a man," Caine said through his teeth, "who's a dozen yards away, sleeping in the protection of alcohol, because a cheap burlesque queen is drawing out his blood until he's damned near dead. I can see through the pink skin, Mrs. Fairchild, and what I see makes me sick. You don't interest me at all, and you never will because I don't like the sight of hate and selfishness and just plain rottenness."

She struck him across the face with one hand and then the other. The fury burned in her eyes and her body trembled with it. She struck him again and again, and Caine's face blacked where a ring ripped his skin.

He sat very still, his hands remaining against the chair arms. "You've just lost yourself a boy, Mrs. Fairchild. Put your clothes on, we're flying back to the Colony. You can find yourself somebody else for this, because I've had enough."

He started to rise, but she put one hand against his chest, and the fury was gone out of her eyes, and there were tears instead.

"Please," she said, and Caine could hear the tears going into her voice. "I'm sorry. I'm awfully sorry. Let me talk to you first, please." She knelt to the ground and watched Caine while thin tears ran down her cheeks.

"About what, Mrs. Fairchild?" Caine said coldly.

"I don't know why I did what I did," she said, touching at the tears. "Too much Scotch, I think. Only I'm still a dancer and it's in my blood. It isn't cheap burlesque, Mr. Caine. It's something deep inside me and I can't help it."

"Nice trait," Caine said, "for a man's wife."

"I had that coming. I've got a lot coming, only the resentment for his drinking, the way he's tried to own me, keeps coming out and I want to hurt him. I know it isn't right, but it's what I do and I want to stop doing

it. He's worried, and it comes out with what he says and what he does, and so I fight him. He thinks if he doesn't find this gem, he's going to lose me."

"Isn't he?" Caine asked, his eyes thin.

"No," she said quietly. "I'm frightened of him and I feel alone with him. But I won't leave him."

"Like I told you," Caine said, "I'm just a hired man. What my customers think or do between themselves is none of my business."

"You're not that cold," she said, looking into his eyes.

"I'm that cold."

She shook her head stubbornly. "Be kind to me, You can. For just this one moment, when I'm not alone or afraid, when there's just this one moment before tomorrow—when it starts all over again."

Caine didn't answer, but he relaxed in his chair slightly and leaned back.

She smiled at him and it was a warm simple smile with all the hardness and sarcasm erased. "Would you have one drink with me? One small drink to seal the night up, so maybe you won't remember me so badly, so maybe you'll think I've got some heart and human feelings?"

Caine waited, watching her shiny eyes. "One drink," he said.

She smiled and stood up, returning to the side of the ship where Fairchild had set up his portable bar. She poured two glasses, and while Caine watched her, he noticed that in her straight, motionless posture, the animal liteness had disappeared. She was very simple—and naive-looking, and when she returned, he saw that the tears were still wet on her face.

She handed him a glass, and she held her own in the air. "A trite toast—here's to two people who met in the Venus night. . . briefly."

"Two people," Caine repeated, lifting his own glass. The Scotch burned down his throat.

She knelt again and smiled at him. Caine noticed then that the music was still beating into the night air, and that the black gown was still very thin. He turned his glass up again, to hurry through the drink. Even in her simplicity and tears he didn't trust himself.

The Scotch seemed to take hold of his blood and he could feel it racing in his veins.

He lifted the glass a third time, and the band that held it seemed suddenly detached from his own movement. A singing began in his head and then disappeared, and when he looked at her, the smiling lips were redder and the shining teeth were whiter. The music pulsed in his head, seeming to beat against his brain.

"What . . . ?" he began, and his voice was thick. He shook his head and looked at his glass. It fell out of his hand.

"A little witch's potion," she said, rising. "Something from the Martian caldron. Quick and oh, so effective."

He fought the feeling that caught hold of him. His brain seemed to deaden until there was only the drums inside his head, and his senses became alive and burning. He could see her before him, and she began to sway back and forth, her hands moving in front of her face. He caught bold of the chair arms to keep his own hands from reaching out.

He tried to cling to reason, but his hands wanted to escape. The flames of the fire flickered somewhere in the distance, and in front of him the black-covered body began to move in rippling shivers. The moving pink hands rose in the air, and there was a shimmer of concealed muscles, dancing, dancing.

He clung to the chair, gritting his teeth, but the drums pounded at his senses, over and over, and the lips smiled and the white teeth shone and the pink body moved in time with the drums.

"Not yet?" he heard her say, somewhere far away.

And the body turned slowly, convoluting in a shimmering dance of thin blackness.

Caine lost his grip on the chair, and he was moving his hands. He heard the laughter, high in the air, stinging his ears and he couldn't stop himself. He was listening to the laughter when his fingers touched skin, and there was only blackness after that.

Minds examine. Judge. Decide. "Grith?" says a round voice. Golden bars snap open. A black cat crouches. Green beads nod within their hoods. The cat leaps, crouches

again, and then begins to stalk. Lidless eyes turn to the cold orb. Voices chant. "Grith?"

III

HE AWOKE as a boot caught the side of his head. He rolled across the ground, the pain exploding inside his head. The boot found him again. Another time, above his eyes. He moaned, trying to make his muscles work, but it was as though he were still caught in a nightmare.

"Filthy damned swine," he heard, and his eyes watched a fist come out of the misty air to smash against his cheek. He rolled again, burying his face against the ground, trying to hide, to protect himself until he could find his senses and his coordination.

"You'll kill him." It was a woman's voice, saying this, a lilting feminine voice that was very, very familiar. Caine tensed himself, waiting for the next blow.

"Get up," a man said.

Caine felt the boot against his legs. He turned over slowly and pulled himself to a sitting position. He shook his head, but the thick mist that was in the morning air seemed to have gotten into his brain. His arms and legs felt as though lead had been poured into his veins.

Slowly it came back to him. The woman. The Scotch. He searched the fog-filled area in front of him. Fairchild, his mouth an ugly line, watched him and in his hand was Caine's pistol. The woman was behind Fairchild, still in the black gown, and Caine could see that it was torn.

"I'd kill you right now," Fairchild said, his voice hoarse with rage, "but I want that gem. Get up."

"Darling," the woman said to her husband, while her eyes danced at Caine. "He's such a mess."

Caine tried to swallow and even that was difficult. Every part of his body had been taken hold of by the drug that had been put into his liquor, and each movement was a task he was certain he couldn't complete. He raised a hand slowly to his face and his fingers came away sticky.

"Get up!" Fairchild growled, his eyes vicious thin slits.

Caine got to his knees and fell flat again. He clutched at the ground, waiting for the

crushing boot. It came, and he tried again. He got to his knees the second time and then, inch by inch, he stood up. For a moment it seemed as though his head were floating away from his shoulders, and he looked down at his body, thinking that what he saw surely belonged to someone else, a limp, ragged body, cut and bruised with no clothes. He was falling again.

Fairchild caught Caine's arm and jerked him upright. "I'll give you two minutes to get your damned clothes on, Caine, and get behind the controls of that ship."

He looked at Fairchild stupidly. The man shook him. Caine turned around and searched for his clothes beside the dead fire. He staggered and groped, and twice, blackness covered his eyes and he went to his knees.

Finally, he stood, weaving, clothed haphazardly, and he was vaguely aware that blood was sliding down his chin, dripping onto his jacket. He touched the blood with a finger and it didn't mean anything to him.

The man turned to his wife. "The same goes for you. Get into the cabin!"

"Charles," she pleaded. "He made me drink so much."

"Go on!" Fairchild said, waving the pistol.

She smiled crookedly and walked toward the ship. The mist lay over the jungle so thickly that the ship, not more than ten or twelve yards away, was barely visible. Caine heard the door of the cabin opening and closing.

Fairchild pointed the gun at Caine's stomach again. "You'd better watch every damned step you take," he said. "This gun is going to stay on you until I get that Screece gem, and the only reason you're alive, you bloody louse, is because I have to have it. Do you understand?"

Caine searched for his voice, and it came out thick and strained. "Won't fly you, . . ." He watched the man's face whiten, and the gun trembled in Fairchild's hand. Then the gun was swinging through the air and Caine watched it coming until it struck him above the eyes.

WATER dripped from his face and his chest, and he fought for air. His brain was a singing maze of pain, and the numb-

ness in his arms and legs kept him riveted to the ground. He opened his eyes, finally, as he felt himself being dragged across the clearing. The rungs of the ladder leading to the ship's cabin were against him. He moved his head and his teeth struck silver metal. His coordination was gone and he couldn't tell what his movements were going to be.

"Up the steps," he heard Fairchild say behind him.

He lifted his hands, fitting them around the rungs of the ladder, and he began to pull himself up. It was an inching effort. Blood got in his eyes, and his head whirled into far-away spins that had nothing to do with the movement of his body. He hung onto the ladder and climbed one rung, then another. He teetered near the top, and Fairchild pushed him into the cabin where he sprawled.

He could hear Fairchild coming up behind him, and the door slammed shut.

Caine rolled onto his back and looked up. She was standing over him in fresh white shorts and blouse. Her hair now was very neat and groomed, and her pink skin was radiant. She smiled at him, her teeth showing very whitely. "You're a pretty thing, Mr. Caine."

He knew he should have felt the rage then, the instinctive fury for what she had done to him. But the drug had left him with nothing but enough reaction to try to fight for consciousness and strength.

"Clean him up," Fairchild said. "Fast. Then we're leaving."

The woman got soap and water from the rear of the cabin. She washed Caine's face, her fingers cruel against the cuts and swellings. She raked the cuts with stinging medicine, and Caine lay unmoving, trying to let time feed him new strength. She stood up, finally, looking at her husband.

"All right," Fairchild said. "Let's go, Caine."

Caine looked at the man's face, at the set of his mouth. He looked at the gun and then at the man's boots. He pulled himself up and staggered into the seat behind the controls. His movements on the controls were slow and rough. He looked at Fairchild once, as the jets fired into the fog-laden air. "Can't fly this way. No balance,

coordination, Visibility's rotten, I . . ."

The man moved the pistol into Caine's side.

Caine faced the instrument panel, trying to keep from weaving. He moved his hands and felt the ship rising. He tried to keep the rise steady and gradual, but his hands jerked. The ship tipped and swung toward the side of the clearing. Thick vine-trees came out of the fog, and Caine forced the ship straight up, the jets roaring. The silver jetcopter swung back and forth, climbing, slipping, dropping. He couldn't move the controls properly.

The sound of the waterfall was in their ears then, and Caine jammed the ship to the opposite side. They touched the tops of the trees, and finally he brought it up enough to be over the jungle and the rocks.

Instinct gave Caine vague direction, and he kept his altitude exaggerated to insure against his faulty senses.

"Some say the Screece gem is a diamond," the woman said, dreamily. "Some say it's an emerald. Some say it's a ruby. What do you say it is, Charles?"

Fairchild sat motionless, silent, in the seat beside Caine. He still held the pistol so that the muzzle pointed into Caine's side.

"Don't try anything, Caine," he said. "I'll smash us all to hell before I'll give up."

Caine flew the ship.

"It's romantic, isn't it?" the woman said, from behind Caine. "The most valuable gem in the world, deep in the Venusian jungle, protected by the long, long cats, and my sweet Charles is going to get it for me. Bless you, Charles. You are an extraordinary husband. I hope the cats don't get you."

Caine heard the words, but his brain was too slow and thick with the drug to understand the sharpness of her words. He only moved the controls, feeling the gun Fairchild held against him. In this condition, he knew that if he tried to fool Fairchild, the man—his nerves tightened the way they were—would not hesitate to pump the pistol into Caine's body.

Caine worked his fingers numbly. If only he could find his control, his response. . .

They were approaching the area where Caine thought the temple should be. "Somewhere," he said, and his tongue was clumsy as he tried to speak. "Somewhere."

THE mist was like layers of soft tissue around the ship. The visibility was not much more than the length of the wings. He eased the ship down, slowly, foot by foot. A golden pike-shaped object appeared beside the right wing. Caine brought the ship up.

He grinned, a sly sudden grin. "Temple," he said foolishly. "Couldn't have hit it closer sober." He thought about the cleverness of what he had just said, laughing over it inside, noticing with a queer detachment how his words came out as though he had been drinking. The damned drug, he thought, but the laughter came up through him and it echoed through the cabin.

Caine felt the gun go hard against his side, the steel bruising his ribs. His laughter was cut short, as though a gag had been slammed across his mouth. "Can't help. . ." he began.

But Fairchild's face was close to his own. "I'll make you laugh, Caine," the man whispered furiously. "I'll make you laugh over what happened. You think about that, eh? You think about that, you bloody. . ."

Vaguely, Caine knew the pistol had been pulled away from his ribs and was whipping toward his arm. He tried to shift out of its way, but he caught it squarely. The pain paralyzed him and even the sound of his cry was caught by his teeth snapping together. The ship wavered and slid downward.

"You stupid fool!" the woman screamed at her husband.

Caine felt himself sliding out of his seat, the pain throbbing. He caught himself and reached for the controls with his good hand. But he only half-balanced the ship before he saw the tip of a vine-tree. He cut the jets. The trees were all around them, enveloping them. He listened to the snap of the wings, heard distantly the splinter of glass, then nothing.

He was looking at the shape of his arm, when he found his vision again. It was bent peculiarly.

"Whose crazy damned arm is that? he thought.

Somehow his brain wanted him to laugh, to slap the comic twisted arm, lying in front of his eyes. The laughter was in his mouth and through his teeth and he raised his good hand.

"Oh, Lord," he said, suddenly sober and feeling the blinding pain. He caught his good hand around a broken metal shaft, and the pain drew tears to his eyes.

I think I'll just go to sleep and die right now, he thought, wondering vaguely where his will and his strength had gone. Did they bleed out? he thought. Did they fall out when the man struck him? Did the woman draw them out last night, like a vampire draws out blood?

Good night, he thought, dimly, dropping his hand from the shaft. Good-by. He closed his eyes.

He was screaming, he knew, and somewhere he heard a man's voice say, "The gauze. The gauze." It was a grating sound, like a metal wheel turning over gravel. He opened his eyes, and Fairchild was wrapping the gauze around his broken arm, splinted from a part of the cabin panelling.

Fairchild looked at him. There was a thick growth of gray whiskers, stubbling the man's chin and cheeks, Cain noticed, and the man's eyes were not sad any more. They appeared to burn, like his wife's. He grinned at Caine and it was a humorless grin, his teeth set tightly together. "You're lucky, Caine," he said. "I set it instead of cutting it off."

Caine watched the grinning stubbled face. He felt a shudder trembling through his body, and the sweat on his face turned cold. I'm not Nic Caine, he thought. Surely not. I'm just a frightened, chilled man with no guts or reason. I am a rubber puppet, that's who I am. Pull the strings, Mr. Puppet Master.

"Get up," said Fairchild.

"That's right," Caine mumbled, smiling crazily.

He pushed himself up and stood swaying in the cabin of the broken ship. He looked around, his eyes suddenly fierce. "Is this twisted wreck my pretty silver ship?" he asked loudly. "Oh, no!" he said, and tried to kick at a splintered panel.

He felt himself pitching forward, and he caught out his good hand, steadying himself. The drug, the pain, he thought deep in his brain, my damned arm.

But he was like two people, watching each other, shifting back and forth from one identity to another. Rational, irrational,

laughing, crying.

He looked at the woman. She was huddling near the rear of the cabin. Blood spilled in a thin line down the side of her face from a cut above her eyes. "We'll never get out," she said. Her voice was a high-pitched sound with no change of tone in it. "We'll never get out."

"Why don't you dance for us?" Caine said, blinking with the brightness of his suggestion.

"Move, Caine," the man said, prodding Caine's back. She'll dance when I give her the gem."

Caine crawled slowly out of the cabin. The undercarriage had been smashed, and the cabin was level with the ground. It was like going into a sea of vapor when he got out of the ship.

How long? he thought, looking at his splintered arm. How long would the drug hang onto his brain? This was not himself. This was a weak spinning scarecrow who was drunk on dope.

Then the pain smashed into his awareness. It disappeared as suddenly. He was in agony, then there was only the foolish whirling of his brain. He turned slowly, like a limp mannequin, searching the blankness of the mist.

"Where am I?" he said aloud.

"About one mile from Heaven," said Fairchild behind him, holding now a rifle from Caine's cabin rack. "Janet?" the man said to the cabin. "Take one of those damn rifles. Mr. Caine is going to lead us to his happy end. The gem first," he said to Caine. "Then you. I'll let you touch it before you die."

The woman came out of the cabin, a rifle in her hands. She pointed it at Fairchild. "We'll never get out of here," she repeated, in her sing-song tone.

"Not without me," Fairchild said quietly, looking at the pointed rifle. He turned his back to her.

The woman's face had lost its pink radiance, and it was white except where the blood trickled.

"Let's go, Caine," Fairchild said.

"I don't know where to go," Caine said stupidly.

"Up," Fairchild said. "Just lead the way up. I don't need you to know where the tem-

ple is now. You got us much closer than we'd planned, you know. You're just bait now, Caine. Bait for the cats. Remember the cats?"

"I won't go through that," the woman said, staring at the mist around them.

"All right," Fairchild said. "Stay here and meet the cats alone. I'll bring the gem back to you, if there's anything left of you. But, by heck, you're going to get it, do you hear me?" He faced her again. "You're going to get that gem if I have to kill seventeen cats, and Caine, and even you. Dead or alive, you're going to get it, do you hear?"

The woman was pale, sick-looking, and Caine tried to remember how she had looked the night before. It was too much effort.

"Move," said the man, prodding Caine. "Move, Mr. Caine."

IV

C AINE moved, trying to find some hate to use on himself for letting the sight of the rifle in the man's hands frighten him the way it did. But there was only a dull craziness within him, where the strength and nerve used to be. It was as though his steel had been melted and drained out of him by the drug.

I'm like a fish, he thought, pushing through the foliage, a fish with a broken fin. Do cats like fish with broken fins? he wondered. And the three of them were moving in a slow silent line through the Venusian wilds.

The sounds were in Caine's brain like a dozen records being played in a large echoing room. Teewh birds pointed their yellow beaks and came screaming at his head. The kiitz birds fluttered wildly out of the thickets, their frightened sound like the rake of giant fingernails across smooth slate.

But there were other things in this part of the jungle. Soft, gelatinous phules, the size of a man's hand, hung to the vine-trees, and when Caine passed them they shifted off the trees to his skin and began their search for juices out of his own body. He swept them away, one at a time, and more found him.

"I have nothing left in my veins for you," he said to one of them sticking to his waist. "Maybe warm tea?"

Fairchild touched the rifle against his back, and Caine pushed the phule away.

A snake-like trill wriggled in front of him, its purple and black skin glistening as though it had been drawn through oil. It was about four feet long and as thick as a heavy rope. Its never-closing eyes stared at Caine. "Hello, friend," Caine said, reaching out his good arm. The trill slid away.

That's what I really am like, he decided, wondering when the pain would come shattering into him again. I am like the trill. I ought to lie down on the ground and start wriggling, instead of walking.

The pain found him then, and his brain was cleared briefly of the veil of the drug. The pain lasted longer this time. Drug wearing off, he thought, only now I don't want it to. And then he thought of the cats; the terrible cats, the horrible cats. . . .

His brain spun and the veil dropped. What was I thinking about? he said to himself. Cats? Was it the cats? Why? Cats are pretty, especially grith cats. They are black, like the spots on a leopard. And what makes me think of a leopard? I'll ask the man behind me, he thought, and stopped.

"Go on, Caine," Fairchild whispered. "Go on, damn you."

Leopards? Leopards? Caine asked himself, and he pushed on through the growth, feeling the ground rising more steeply.

Razor plants licked at his skin, until his flesh was slit finely in a dozen places. The gauze around his arm became a fuzzy mass, like rags. If I see a cat, Caine promised himself, I'll take a splint off my arm and bit him over the head with it.

The mist hung around them like a bungry shroud, eager to cloak everything on the planet with its muggy wetness. Then the growth lessened a bit, and Caine saw bare rock here and there, it was easier to move and he did not jar his arm as much, but somewhere in his brain an old knowledge told him that this would be certain grith territory, and every step now was a step closer to the black face with the orange eyes and sharp teeth.

Caine felt himself growing weaker, and each motion was a building effort. The heat had risen, but there was no sweat on his face now, only a burning dryness. His head seemed to start its floating again, and he

thought for a moment that it might drift up over the trees, like a balloon.

The idea was very funny to him, and laughter grew inside of him. He grinned, feeling his stomach move with it, until suddenly he was freezing his movement, laughing into the mist-filled air, staring straight into the orange eyes of a grith cat.

The laughter stopped in his mouth. He blinked once. The cat didn't move. Fairchild and the woman, Caine knew, had halted behind him. The cat's eyes shown through the mist like fiery globes. I'll pet him, Caine thought with great detachment, right on his black head, and then he'll go away.

The cat was motionless.

Caine knelt slowly, looking straight into the cat's eyes. It was about ten yards away.

Caine turned to look at Fairchild. The man was on one knee, the rifle pointing at the cat's head. The woman waited behind him, half-crouched, holding her rifle tight against her side.

Caine looked back to the cat, moving his head slowly. He could see the great swishing tail, moving back and forth, hack and forth.

Why doesn't the man shoot? Caine asked himself. Why is he waiting this way?

Time halted.

Caine edged his look back to Fairchild. You crazy fool, he thought. You have the rifle in your hands, you. . .

And then he saw the sweat dripping from the man's face, the staring eyes, drained of their focus by fear. The man's body was trembling, and Caine thought: he's going to drop the rifle out of his hands, he's. . .

THE woman screamed. "Kill him! Kill him—" The rifle exploded in her hands and bullets whined through the air. Caine felt a hot sting in his shoulder. And the cat was a roaring, crazed thing that swept through the air, a flash of shining blackness.

The air came apart with the sound of the rifle and the screams of the woman and the roaring of the cat. Caine waited, as though this were a dream he was watching. The cat had leaped straight for the woman, and she was tangled with the black and white claws now, so that Caine saw only a rolling, screaming mass.

Then there was no more sound from the

woman, just a broken, bleeding body, and the cat was crouching again, the black coat stippled with red, the orange eyes wild.

Caine blinked, realizing that Fairchild was sprawled beside him, a bullet through his head, his hands just touching his unfired rifle.

I can't do it, Caine thought, looking at the rifle. Too slow. I'll have those claws in me before I can even touch it.

The cat hugged closer to the ground, its muscles bunching.

I'll try, Caine thought, and his hand was moving toward the rifle, slowly, like a floating feather, it seemed. Jump, he said silently to the cat. I can't do it.

"Grith?" sounded a flute-like voice.

The cat was motionless.

"Grith?"

The cat rose slowly and backed, tail swishing. Greer hands slapped together, and the cat turned and disappeared.

Caine placed his palms flat against the ground, propping himself, and watched the approaching figures. The mist seemed to be disappearing, and he could see more clearly the green skin and the large, unblinking eyes that looked out solemnly from beneath the hoods of the gray capes.

Priests? Caine wondered. *From the temple?* I didn't know there were Venusians here, he said to himself, and although it was a very slight disclosure, as though he had suddenly learned that there were more men on Venus than women, he was astounded and impressed with it. "Well," he said, grinning up at them as they stopped beside him. "Well, well."

He got to his knees and, still smiling, looked at his arm where the gauze had come loose. He shook his head in wonderment. He narrowed his eyes and examined the blood trickling from the surface wound in his shoulder. "Well, well," he repeated, and stood up.

The woman was a mangled shape on the wet ground, and the man lay very still. Caine looked from one to the other. "Yes, yes," he said, aloud.

He turned to the gray-caped Venusians and found the somber eyes watching him, in their kindly way. One of them reached out and touched Caine's shoulder above the broken arm. Others moved to the bodies of

the man and woman and bent over them, making floating motions with their delicate green hands.

Praying? Caine wondered, watching these motions. He shrugged. He couldn't hold a thought very long.

The mist was evaporating quickly. Caine, looking up, thought he could see a pointed outline. Then suddenly—high above—there was the golden temple, a shimmer of towering spires of yellow beauty, splashed over by brilliant sunshine.

Caine turned his face up to a strange sun, a blinding sun that sent its bright life down through the leaves. And Caine was aware that the caped figures were kneeling all around, praying in a jumble of voices, their hands stretching up to the infrequent visitor of light.

What are they saying? Caine asked, smiling queerly. What is it they're saying? Screece? The Sun? The most valuable gem on Venus? Is that what they worship in the golden temple? Caine looked at the man and then at the woman. Is that what they had come from Earth and from Mars to find? The Sun? He felt the laughter starting in him again, as though it were someone else laughing. But his mouth widened and his teeth glistened in the sunlight, and he laughed long pealing laughter.

"Here it is," he said, staggering to the side of the man's body. "Here's your gem. Do you see it, Fairchild?" He pointed to the sky. "Give it to her," he said, laughing through his words. "No? I'll give it to her for you then. How's that?" He turned and moved slowly to the woman, stumbling. "Here," he said to the woman's staring eyes. "Here it is, you see?"

He looked at her face, shadowed by a large leaf of a vine-tree. He reached up and jerked the leaf away so that the sunlight fell full on her white face. "There! Take it! From Charles, to you, through me. Isn't it beautiful, so big, so brilliant, so . . ." The laughter was getting in the way of his words and he could feel tears going down his face.

Pale green hands were holding him so that he wouldn't fall. And they were moving him away toward the temple. Caine looked at the large kindly eyes around him, feeling the hands guiding him. He couldn't stop laughing, only he wished to God he could, because it made the pain worse. And he couldn't take much more pain.

The lips of one of the green faces moved. "Wress?" said the voice, the word pronounced with difficulty.

"Rest?" Caine said, between spasms of laughter that he was quite certain now was crying, instead. "Yes, yes," he said, trying to wipe at his tears. "Oh, yes. Rest . . ."

Pale green hands extend again, palms down, and make sweeping downward motions, destroying evil. They are cupped then and raised, slowly, as though lifting purity to the top of the golden spires and beyond, where a bright sun burns. Feet step soundlessly and figures kneel, circling about a fist-sized orb. "Screece," says a flute-like voice. "Screece," says another. "Screece," say a dozen voices. Hands motion and the silver globe is no longer dull and cloudy, but filled with pure shining sunlight, so that it glitters like a thousand diamonds. Lips move silently. A cat whimpers somewhere, then sleeps. Silence.



Bogus Angel watched protectively from the wall top as the mechanical bloodhound inched toward Teacrete while she talked with the police.

GAMA IS THEE!

By STANLEY MULLEN

On Venus, if one rings a doorbell, or bangs on a locked gate at night, it is adventure. You never know who—or what—will answer your summons. The door swings slowly open and you brace yourself to look. Will it be maid—or monster—or bath?

WHEREVER men gather and talk, someone is sure to mention Khaljean's, on Venus. Men will always be fascinated by tales of the strange and wonderful and fantastic, and Khaljean's—zoo, petshop, wild animal supply house—

is the stuff from which legends are made. One hears of the place on Mars or Earth, on Titan or Rhea, on Callisto or Ganymede, even in the subsurface mines of Pluto or the curious twilight outposts on Mercury, and some of the yarns will probably lessen



the tedium of light-year watches when the first manned spacer pushes beyond the frontiers of the solar system.

Most of the stories are 21st century versions of the tall tale, for both establishment and owner stagger imagination and breed fabulous accounts. A rumor that Khaljean will fabricate to order any nightmarish monster from synthetic flesh and organic spare parts is obvious exaggeration. The claim that Khaljean can mate any curious life-form captured by far-roving hunters is also false—since he failed twice. Khaljean loves animals and collects them chiefly for pleasure. He will sell some for pets and for educational exhibitions, but for each one sold he keeps ten. Everyone knows that he has frequently risked death rather than kill or injure a living creature.

Of all his zoo's wonders, none can compare with Khaljean—for man is the most fantastic of animals, and Khaljean is the most extraordinary of men. Khaljean is both public figure and man of mystery. Nobody knows his race or origin, and nowadays nobody asks. With the epidemics of mutation in the Earth-colonies of Venus, and the standard gene-tangents accepted among Venusian natives, such curiosity is bad form. And dangerous.

So Khaljean's, and the stories about it, have grown steadily through the years. The strangest story of all concerning the zoo is one that, for good reason, no one tells. It happens to be true. One night, in Castarona, by the Yellow Sea—

But the trouble did not start in Khaljean's. There are some who say it did not finish there . . .

AUSTERITY had finally caught up with Venus. Pao Chung's subcellar fungeweed hell in the native quarter of old Castarona was ordered to close every night at midnight (Venus time)—or else. Being a Venusian business man, a very rugged individualist, and a type Q mutant, Pao Chung preferred to chance the "or else."

Among interesting people netted in the raid were:

Pao Chung, himself. Bland and over-civilized, he had grown rich from traffic in illegal drugs and the outlawed mechanical hypnotizers. Despite pointed ears and a

gnome-like expression of detached malice, he appeared to be reasonably human, even in his devotion to vice as a means of livelihood. Anything illegal and profitable was his vocation; his hobbies ranged from innocent blackmail to murder for fun. Recent extension of his operations from slave trading into political corruption had incensed even the grafting officials of Castarona. They waited only an opportunity to catch him off balance. Hence the raid.

Bat Ferris, spaceman, wanted on an open charge warrant sworn out by Solar Surveys, Inc.,—and wanted preferably alive and in condition to answer questions. Ferris had learned long ago not to give his right name, but an alias is poor disguise if one's brain wave patterns happen to be on file. And sometimes if they are not. Being off "reservation" at all, and particularly without permission and lacking his ident-armband, would mean real trouble. His capture in the raid was pure mischance, due to entering Pao Chung's only for the virtuous purpose of rescuing his partner and friend—

Bogus Angel, X-type mutant from South Venus, painfully well known to police records. The only angelic attribute he could claim was his twenty-foot wingspread. His face bore eerie resemblance to those demonic gargoyles carved on medieval cathedrals. Fine fur in stripes of ochre, burnt orange and smudged brown covered the visible parts of his anthropoid anatomy, making him resemble a tiger left in the rain long enough for the dyes to run.

Angel liked peace and quiet, and resorted to gambling, theft, arson, aggravated assault and occasional assassination to obtain it. In the icy morass of his soul, the few cracks vented sinister and malicious humor. His greatest virtue was warped and violent loyalty to Ferris—which was not necessarily a virtue from the official point of view. Angel's appetite for and capacity for misuse of drugs, alcohol and mechanical hypnotizers was miraculous—but when loaded, he was dangerous.

Of nine others scooped in the raid, only one fact need be mentioned. They are still in jail, which indicates lack of initiative or good sense. Jailbreak on Venus is a sporting proposition, and inevitably weeds the sheep from the goats. Pao Chung and Bogus Angel

were definitely goats, and Ferris may be considered a dark gray sheep. For various reasons, it was essential to all three to escape—and quickly.

They stood together in the jailyard. Ferris and Angel had relapsed into silence as Pao Chung approached.

"When are you planning escape?" Pao Chung asked with a directness not expected of him.

Angel chuckled, but Ferris stared suspiciously. "How are you so sure we intend to escape?" he parried.

Pao Chung shrugged. "A simple question easily answered. While your friend was in my shop I manipulated the hypnotic machines. He talked, chiefly about himself, but also about you. Enough to give me a clue to your real identity, though probably he does not guess it himself. I know that you dare not stay. Eventually, they will check your brain wave patterns and learn . . . too much. Which is the greater risk?"

"What business is that of yours?"

"None, directly," Pao Chung admitted. "But I enjoy fishing in troubled waters. Other people's business can often be turned to my profit. In this case, since we are being frank, I wish to leave with you when you go. Take me along, or I talk before you can make the attempt."

Mayhem shone in Angel's eyes but Ferris put a restraining hand on the furry arm.

"**D**EAD men don't talk," urged Angel hopefully, his non-human tongue licking feral lips.

"Wait," ordered Ferris. "If you kill him now, we will have no chance to escape. It would draw too much attention to us."

"Besides being foolish," said Pao Chung smoothly. "Both of you are strangers in Castarona. Where would you go? Who would hide you? How long would you last?"

"Talk fast," Ferris advised gently. "If you know so much, you know we have little to lose."

"Only your lives, perhaps. More, if my deductions are correct. Listen to me. Like you, I am in greater peril here. My offense is a minor one. By now, I should have been fined and let go with a warning. I suspect the authorities of more sinister intentions. It will be easy to find a pretext if they wish

to be rid of me. I must escape. Alone, none of us would stand a chance. Together, who knows . . . ?"

Ferris consulted his partner with a glance. Angel nodded, but imposed a question.

"And afterwards, what of your deductions?"

"I will forget them," promised Pao Chung.

"See that you do," said Ferris. "Or we will."

Pao Chung ignored the prophecy amiably. "I know a possible refuge once we have managed the escape. A man in the city owes me favors. As refuge, of course, it will be temporary. They will have mechanical trackers after us eventually, but not at first. Electronic bloodhounds would spoil their sport, make killing us too easy. But the nature of our sanctuary will give them pause for a time. Complex, interesting and dangerous, it is the one place in Castarona no one will think to look. And there is enough space to hide in for quite a while."

"Such a place sounds interesting," Ferris agreed. "But I suppose you know every unsavory rat's nest in Castarona."

"Not a rat's nest," said Pao Chung, smiling. "Much better. Have you heard of Khal-jean's?"

"Who hasn't? That should nuddle the pursuit for a day or two. But can you count on Khaljean?"

Pao Chung snorted. "Blackmail is my professional secret, so don't ask details. Khaljean will grant us refuge. Not willingly, perhaps, but I have enough on him to guarantee his conduct. How about a plan for getting out of jail?"

Ferris laughed harshly. "You've paid your passage. Now we'll pay ours. Hiding out with the rest of the wild animals seems very appropriate. Listen carefully . . ."

Pao Chung and Angel bent an ear, nodding approval.

Jailbreak looks temptingly easy. Hazards of escape are mostly mental, so far as barriers of barred doors and windows, locked gates, or walls of stone, metal or plastic are concerned. Inner and outer doors are frequently open. Prisoners move about at will, within defined limits. Even there, no physical hindrance is put in the escapee's way. He may pause at the door and indulge in whim-

sical repartee with guards or warden. He may delay his exit long enough to exchange fond farewells with friends and fellow inmates—and he had better.

Once outside the fun begins. It is open season on fugitive prisoners, and the first guard lucky enough to fatally blast an escapee receives two weeks with pay and a cash bonus for every hour short of the deadline required for killing or recapturing a runaway. Any prisoner who makes good his escape, and lasts a full three days is written off the books. Either way, he is written off, since the guards make no pretense of trying to recapture him alive, and the hunt is geared to surprising efficiency.

It should be a spirited gamble, but few men ever make the attempt, and fewer still succeed—so the sport may be said to languish. History records only five men who made the finish line, though hundreds used to try for it. Building walls opposite the gateway bear leprous scars from blaster discharges which brought several daring attempts to pyrotechnical conclusions.

Angel sauntered up to a guard on duty at the main gate. He looked across the busy street at the flaking walls and evidences of extreme heat. A bored guard glanced casually at the brawny Venusian, taking curious note of his folded wings.

"Going out?" asked the guard with cynical humor. "You'll get those wings singed, sonny."

Angel smiled, and a dream of violence lived briefly in his gem-faceted eyes. "I might," he mused softly. "What handicap will you give me?"

"Close my eyes and count to five," offered the guard, grinning viciously.

"Start counting," suggested Angel.

THE guard's eyes and mouth opened wide, his grin changed to a glare, alert and suspicious. At that moment, alarms blared in the cellblock and jailyard.

Angel appeared to stumble, thrusting himself heavily against the guard. Already off-balance, trying to look in two directions at once, the man lurched halfway through the gate. Automatic selenium cell alarms caught the movement and added their wild clamors to the jangling babel from the building. Volumes of dense black smoke poured from

doors and windows of the cellblock's lower floors. From above came shrill screams from the trapped inmates on upper floors.

"Fire!" yelled Angel. Then he was running, not through the gate but towards the building.

Guards and prisoners milled in ultimate confusions. Jailyard was a melee, but Angel forced a passage. At the cellblock doorway he paused long enough to make sure that guards were rushing a long ladder of light-metal alloy to the wall.

Inside, he plunged through churning confusions of smoke, sound and invisible solids. In a city as inflammably built as Castarona, fire inevitably creates panic. Equipment must be always at hand. Automatic sprinklers were already deluging the threatened interior with water and chemicals. Angel waded knee-deep in chemical foam to the stairway and ascended against the pressure of a descending waterfall. Voices and metallic alarms mingled in shrill discords.

Groping blindly and colliding with hysterical prisoners, Angel fought up the spiraling cascades of the stairway like a trout seeking the spawning grounds.

At the fourth floor, he got to a window and smashed the glass, then set up a bedlam of howls and shrieks. From below, the light-alloy ladder angled up toward him. Its hooks engaged the window ledge. With a yelp of maniacal joy, he snatched it from the hands of the steadiers on the ground, and gave a series of quick jerks to dislodge the mounting guards and firefighters. With easy strength, he lifted it clear of the ground and rung by rung hoisted it upward. Bat Ferris and Pao Chung grasped it from the roof parapet and held on while he raced upstairs again and helped them drag it to the roof.

The nearest building was just about a ladder-length away.

By prodigies, they raised it to the vertical, then let it slant in the direction indicated. It toppled and swung in a wild arc. There was a bad moment when all three realized that it did not quite reach. Acting instantaneously, Angel lifted the pivot end, hooked his knees to the parapet and extended the ladder by his own length. The far end struck hard, bounced high, nearly tearing Angel from his precarious hold.

"Over!" he commanded, while the vibrations still jarred painfully through his body.

Without argument, one at a time, Ferris and Pao Chung walked gingerly across the perilous, swaying bridge. Kneeling, Ferris made sure the ladder hooks were secure on the other parapet. He cried out.

Angel relaxed his kneeholds, beating his wings furiously and climbing like a bird on a breaking treelimb. The ladder swung in giant's pendulum. Angel moved with lightning speed and miraculous precision, maintaining balance with threshing pinions while his lithe legs and powerful arms carried him upward. He was mounting the upper rungs when the ladder crashed savagely against the building side, writhing, vibrating, tearing its hooks free and sending broken masonry crashing into the dizzy depths below. Angel leaped clear, caught the parapet and dragged himself up.

Guards boiled onto the jailhouse roof and laced blaster beams across the chasm between buildings. Crouched low, the fugitives ran, taking advantage of every cover. Explosions followed them and they raced through pelting storms of molten stone and metal.

"Over the roofs," Ferris shouted. "They'll follow soon enough. Probably the near streets are already blocked off, and we'll need all the time we can snatch."

They halted for breath in the shelter of a vast dome. Pao Chung glanced admiringly at his enforced allies. "Well-generated," he commented. "Even to the timing of the faked fires. Too bad such talent as ours must be wasted on an audience as unappreciative as the police. However, you've kept your bargain. We're out, and still alive. With a few minutes' start, and the rooftops of the city to play hide and seek in. Now, if we can reach Khaljean's Petshop."

"We'll reach it," Ferris promised grimly.

II

AROUND them was the fantastic skyline. From below, in the teeming streets, came a rising buzz like the droning activity of a hive of angry bees. Above, rose the city-wide dome of fused quartz, its crystal-line concavity faintly iridescent as it reflected the questioning beams of giant searchlights.

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North, between the fugitives and the older native quarters of Castarona, were the gigantic systems of airlocks, and below that, the sprawling tangles of dockland.

Ferris led his companions in a tortuous route that covered miles of angled and uneven rooftops. Realizing that his ident-cards must have come through, he knew that police and security officials must be turning the city inside out in a wild scramble to locate and deal with him. Speed was essential, and more than his personal safety depended upon the outcome of the wild chase over the jagged skylines.

Knots of wary policemen and determined security soldiers invaded the rooftops and began searching the hundreds of square miles. In case the escaped prisoners had descended from the high levels, even business blocks were being turned out. The whole city was undergoing systematic scouring. Officialdom was desperate and badly frightened. Mechanical trackers had already been sent for. Never before had they been used so early in the game. The man, or whatever he was, Bai Ferris must be found at once, slain if possible. The hunt was on, full cry.

After two near brushes with patrols, Ferris finally decided that it would be safer to descend to the streets. Dragnets spread over the world above the city, and only luck had kept the trio from being sighted a dozen times. They were near the edge of the city where the half-bubble of the dome comes down into a series of cones which are the great airlocks protecting the city-atmosphere from the troubled violence and noxious fumes of outer Venus.

Like shadows the fugitives descended, going down darkened spirals of stairways, stealing elevators, moving furtively among dark, twisting alleyways, crawling under vast landing stages and skirting heaps of exotic Venusian produce ready for shipping to the nine inhabited worlds. In the cluttered dockland areas they collided blindly with an armed patrol.

Angel, acting on pure instinct, leaped high, then swooped down like a striking hawk. The rustle of his opened wings was like the flapping of wind-whipped flames. His outstretched arms gathered two of the four man patrol and crushed life from them before they sensed danger. Ferris was al-

most as quick. He leaped and strangled, and a man died in swift, deadly silence. Pao Chung, unused to managing his own violence, was clumsier. A blaster went off. Then Angel took over the difficulty. The soldier broke and ran, screaming, firing his blaster twice more without aiming.

The uproar would bring help. But the soldier was beyond help. Angel soared and dived. There was no fight.

Now armed, the fugitives fled swiftly. Pao Chung took over the lead. By devious streets and crooked alleys, they went in the extremes of haste.

Further caution was useless. Now that the alarm had been given, speed was the only hope. Pao Chung knew every secret rat-run in the old native quarter. He used most of them. If the passage of the fugitives caused a ripple of excitement among the polyglot denizens of that forbidding area, they did not know it, nor heed it. All three knew the natives well enough to be certain that the police could expect no favors from that source. All Venusians are natural anarchists, born outlaws and rebels against authority. The trail would die on stubborn tongues unless mechanical trackers were used.

Even then, unless the police and security squads came in massed force, there would be incidents to delay pursuit. Natives, and the human debris of nine worlds which had found refuge in the quarter, had no reason to love authority. In one sense, the area was an armed camp within the walls. Uneasy truce at best existed between these motley dwellers and the intruding minions of the nominal officialdom. While the hunted could expect no actual help from the guerilla forces of Castorona's underworld, there was the certainty of hindrance to the hunters.

Patrols and searching squads converged on the freight-dock stages, drawn by radioed reports of a clash. From there a trail of sorts led straight into the native quarter. As the soldiers and police massed on the fringes of the area, sparks of trouble began to develop, were quickly fanned to flame, and quenched only by continuous violence and the arrival of overwhelming forces.

Pao Chung led his companions into a dark, zigzagging alley.

"Not far now," he gasped hoarsely, struggling for breath.

From close behind came a rising uproar.

THE alley ended abruptly against a high, blank, curving wall of reinforced concrete. Pao Chung's raw, burning throat refused speech, but he gestured over the wall. There was no gate. Angel sprang lightly to the top and gave his partners in crime a hand up. They dropped into darkness on the far side. Light writhed and flickered curiously on the great dome overhead. Tumult died away behind them as they fled across a wide open space, then rose to shocking crescendoes. Reflections flared in the dome.

Uproar dwindled to uneasy silence, as if the massed forces of law and order had found the native quarter stickier going than expected, and had been forced to retire in disorder.

Pao Chung stopped as if checking directions, then led off at a sharp tangent. The way went through fields. Diffused light from the tall city-buildings filtered in here and gave some sense of the ground surface, which was fortunate. Numerous small fences of wire hummed and sputtered on insulator-posts. Electrified guard-fences. Pao Chung burdled them carefully, but they were low enough to trip and incinerate an incautious trespasser, unaware of their existence and unused to their spacing.

Oppressive silence brooded over the place. Atmosphere was thick with pungent and exotic odors that lingered with unpleasantly alien tang in the nostrils.

Ahead loomed a high stockade of chrome-steel pilings, pierced by a single monstrous gate.

Pao Chung ran up and hammered on the gate. Its reverberations roused thunderous echoes in the night. A curious echo persisted and increased in volume.

On Venus, if one climbs a fence, rings a doorbell, or bangs on a locked gate at night, it is adventure. You never know who or what will answer your summons. The door swings slowly open, and you brace yourself to look. Will it be maid or monster—or both?

This was Khaljean's . . .

The gate swung open a scant double handspan, checked by a short length of

sturdy chain. A head poked through the aperture. An interesting head, even in the difficult light. Details were obscure, but there was a flash of curd-white skin fine-modeling of feature, a delicate oval face framed in a swinging bell of dark hair.

In this case, the summons was answered by, presumably, a maid, Khaljean's daughter, Teurete, herself something of a legend.

A woman can be described in terms of anatomical rhapsody. Or one may dwell endlessly upon sweetness of disposition, upon quaint and unique charms of personality. A potential lover may fashion poetic conceits upon the lilting moonbeam qualities in her voice, compare her skin to flower-petals, her eyes to gemfires, liken the graceful movements of limbs and body to the liquid symphonies of swirling water. Or these matters may be left wholly to the imagination and the girl described obliquely by reference to her effect upon the male population in her immediate vicinity.

The effect was jarring enough.

"Go away!" she said inhospitably. She leaned further through the opening to snarl fluent imprecations in Venusian billingsgate at the nocturnal callers.

Pao Chung braved the storm. "Shut up!" he said evenly.

Teurete's eyes fixed on him savagely, and she took a sharp breath with the obvious intention of renewing her tirade. Then she thought better of it and restrained her out-rage long enough to throw a taunt in his face.

"Is Pao Chung so desperate for money that he comes now in the middle of the night? You're two days early for your payment. Come back then."

"Call your father," ordered the Venusian.

"Khaljean is not here. He's . . . hunting. Come back after noon tomorrow if you must see him."

The head withdrew inside. The gate crashed shut. Bolts grated.

"Shall I fly over the stockade and throttle her?" asked Angel, rippling his wings.

Pao Chung hammered the gate again. As before, the racketing animal chorus repeated the sound, with variations. Pao Chung kept pounding until the gate was opened again.

This time the head did not appear, but a wiry female voice addressed them from the inside darkness.

"Still here? The police must be hunting you."

"They are."

"Good! I will point you out and stay to watch the kill."

Pao Chung chuckled evilly. "Do that. The records of Khaljean's background and illegal activities is in my safe. My will provides for publication of all such papers upon my death."

The voice hesitated. "It might be worth humiliation or disgrace to be rid of you permanently."

"It might," agreed Pao Chung. "Many people have thought so. I wonder if Khaljean will be one of them."

With a scrape of bare metal, bolts retreated into sockets and the chain was removed. Crack widened enough to permit entrance.

"Come in, then," Teurete said wearily.

"I will let my father decide when he returns. For tonight, you can stay. But I won't answer for your safety. The animals are roused and nervous. I am not sure I can control them, with strangers here."

BEASTLY cacophonies greeted the entrance of the fugitives. An atmosphere of alien and indescribable uneasiness pervaded the vast compound with its rows and piled banks of cages. The atmosphere was the emotion of night-hauntings, and the sound was its voice.

No sign above the gate proclaimed, *Here Dwells Nightmare*, nor, *Through These Portals Pass the Most Incredible Life-Forms in the Known Universe*. There was no circus atmosphere. Just a nameless blending of sounds and smells and alien vibrations that stirred the imagination like evil flames licking at forgotten folk memories. On Venus, the term *uneasily* has naturally lost meaning, but here was a hint of dreadful abysses beyond even the exotic fecundity of the cloud-veiled planet. Here were half-audible chords beyond all the known octaves. Here, in the troubled darkness one sensed symbols of instincts, minds and feelings that man was never meant to know or understand. Here was the final question mark of evolu-

tion—whence, and to what dreadful purpose?

What incredible virtuosity of the Unknown Creator had brought these unthinkable beings into multiform existence? And why? What purpose did they serve in the plan of Creation? Or was there any purpose? Was there even a plan?

But Ferris remembered such thoughts from his lonely, monastic youth on Mars, and during the schooling period on Earth. One had time for long unhappy thoughts in such a segregated childhood and some of them still reverberated deep inside him.

The girl drew back to let them enter, flashing the beam of a hand radillum on each in turn. Her glance flicked each of them in examination sharp enough to draw blood. She received them in silence, for Teucrete's mind was not on the duties of a hostess to unexpected guests.

"Wait here," she ordered crisply. Then she went among the tangled avenues between cages and spoke soothingly to the caged brutes. Her voice crackled, purred, coughed, roared, hissed.

The bird people were the first to heed. Their bright, nervous chittering subsided into occasional geysers of chirping. Surly sand leopards from Mars paced their cages and vented sounds like needles caught in the grooves of antique disc recordings. Partially gaseous life forms from Saturn had no vocal apparatus, but showed their uneasy displeasures by flaring into sullen crimson and bruised purples of luminosity.

Ferris followed the girl closely on her rounds, his eyes staring in wonder at the caged monsters revealed when her light bathed the barred cubicles. Some cages were not cages in the ordinary sense at all. Behind barriers of streaming light crouched protoplasmic entities of no set form. Moondogs sported aimlessly in pools of ionized gas. Wireflies battered themselves against invisible net barriers. Complex mysteries of Plutonian life-forms floated in magnetic fields. Metallic crystals built themselves into coral-like colonies resembling miniature castles.

Less *outré* creatures inhabited the myriads of cell-blocks—the ordinary and extraordinary varieties of apes and cats and dogs, the bovines and marsupials, the squeaking

rats and trumpeting elephants, the endless species of sea-creatures, the tree-haunters and the desert dwellers, the burrowers and the flyers. There were supposedly extinct saurians, and examples of tomorrow's freaks and mutants. There were brute clowns and tragedians. There were—

But Khaljean's has been described often enough in magazine articles, sometimes with tri-dimensional pictures in color. Any reader so inclined may look into the back files of *Inter-Planetary Magazine* and stupefy himself with the famous issue of July, 2091.

Teucrete sensed that she was followed, but with pointed insolence, ignored Ferris and continued her rounds. Gradually, her eerie tones brought calm to the multiform excitements of the compound. She returned eventually to Pao Chung and Angel.

"I will take you back through the laboratories to the inner maze," she said irritably. "Move quietly and do not stumble in the dark. Some of the protection barriers are fragile, and a few exist only in the minds of the creatures in them. If excited too much, they can break through. Many are man-killers."

"One man-killer runs loose in here," observed Angel drily.

Teucrete disposed of the intended compliment with a sneer. "Pao Chung has long had such ideas. Through pressure on my father he has tried to . . . to buy or barter for me. Such disposal is mine to make, not my father's. I have my price, but it is high."

It is evidence of Teucrete's more obvious charms that three masculine minds went into gear, calculating resources.

Teucrete laughed viciously. "The first item is Pao Chung's head on a platinum platter."

"A platinum platter is not unobtainable," said Angel speculatively.

Pao Chung was not offended. He chuckled unpleasantly. "Such fire as yours would bring a high price in the slave marts of Yaba," he said. "My head would bring more, locally. Should we not move further from the gates? A scanner could pierce several layers of metal as thin as this stockade. Perhaps I can bring your price down, or my offer up. But another occasion for bargaining would suit both of us better."

"If there are other occasions for any of us," Ferris put in bitterly.

From outside came the sounds of many movements, the rustle and clatter of questing men, hoarse shouts and a confusion of crowd sounds. Above all, like a thin thread of sound, binding the other noises together, was a high, ear-piercing, nerve-wracking drone.

Angel flittered to the top of the stockade and peered warily through the razor-edged metal pilings. He swooped down to his companions with whispered verification of their suspicions.

"The mechanical trackers," he said.

"Perhaps there is still a deal open," muttered Pao Chung. He bowed with sardonic malice toward Teucrete. "We have one possession of greater value than my head or your body. My young friend here—"

Teucrete snorted contemptuously. "Him!" But her glance lingered on Ferris momentarily. "What do you mean?"

"Ferris is a gamma-man," said Pao Chung. Even Angel gasped with shock. Teucrete's eyes widened in incredulity, horror and fear.

III

FEAR is a subtle poison.

It began long ago, in a small New Mexico town, long before there were gamma-men or even interplanetary travel. The fear radiated from mushrooming clouds with impossible radiance at the core, and the fear did more harm to the minds of men than the deadly spectra of invisible death did to their bodies.

It began with scientists in cages in the name of national securities; it developed into continual surveillance for all men engaged in atomics. These workers, and their families, led cloistered, monastic lives. They intermarried, since there was little contact with outsiders, and they shared generations of haunted, spy-ridden lives. They lived in the midst of fear and mistrust, while the earth went through its chronic spirals of war and the preparations. Throughout history, scholars and philosophers have warned that knowledge must be free and universal, like sunlight. But there have always been wars and secrets and guarded weapons, and fear

is older than man.

Scientists were men of dangerous knowledge, of destructive potentials. As such, they were hostages of fear and illusions of safety. They were segregated, guarded, well-fed, and at first provided with all the deadly toys necessary to their amusements. It was all painfully logical and futile, but all the best brains of mankind were locked up to putrefy for lack of fresh air and the stimuli of mutual thoughts. Their knowledges and prerogatives became hereditary.

Natural law works against segregation. Artificial isolation of any group leads to misunderstandings, prejudices, resentments, mutual fears, and eventually to violence. Fear-hysteria is a serpent devouring its own tail. In time, the once-honored and glorified gamma-men became feared and hated. In the minds of the ignorant and superstitious populace, they were associated with medieval wizards and workers of dreadful miracles. The threat of gamma groups became a political pawn, and was used as a club to beat down restless, unhappy populations.

With their knowledge, and the popular delusion of their almost supernatural powers, it was easy enough for ambitious men to misuse the Scientists. In some cases, the gamma-men themselves usurped authority, but this noble experiment slipped through their fingers, and they lost control from sheer unworldliness. In truth, from the working of natural law, the juice had run out of them and they no longer understood the basics of normal human relations. In a final paroxysm of public panic, they were disarmed, their toys taken away, and every last gamma-man imprisoned in carefully guarded and isolated colonies. Like the ancient Indians, they were placed in reservations and kept there by force.

After this culminating outrage, the gamma-men lost heart for practical activity. Locked into their libraries, they turned to abstractions and dabbled in dead-end philosophies. Most of them were querulous oldsters, hidebound by tradition, their sciences now become a ritual religion, their books exalted as "The Word," and their fading knowledge still held secret for reasons long forgotten.

Not quite all gamma-men accepted this half-life allotted to them. There were sports,

avatars, occasional throwbacks who rebelled and went "off reservation."

None of these actually ran amuck, but so great was the fear-conditioning on one side, and so difficult the adaptation to ordinary living on the other that there were painful accidents and incidents. Nothing genuinely monstrous occurred, but enough friction developed to keep alive and add to the public dread of gamma-men. The term became a byword for nursery terror. And in their turn, the infant generations of gamma-men learned to pity and despise the ignorant and corrupt multitudes of normal humanity. They lost contact with their human heritage.

In recent years, few gamma-men had broken out to mingle with the expanding races now peopling and colonizing the frontiers of the solar system. Those few were hunted down like outlaws, and killed with brutal ingenuity.

But a new generation had come among gamma-men, with an urge so passionate and devout they themselves did not understand it. Either some latent folk-memory, or some emotional mutation, urged them to go forth and civilize mankind. In the old books, they tracked down knowledge and made grandiose plans for engineering the renaissance. Realizing their common origin, and longing for more nearly normal lives, they grouped together and made a pact to see some changes made.

Studying history and the other technologies of man, they soon discovered that social, economic and psychological sciences had lagged far behind the other developments. These were the blind spots of mankind, and these led to all the other serious and tragic misdirections of effort. Always, the sons of Adam had struggled to achieve workable systems, and always these systems had broken down or failed at critical moments.

If some means could be found—

Eventually, the means was tracked down from a clue in one of the oldest books. It was not found, but its existence deduced and proved to the satisfaction of the searchers. Somewhere, hidden in a forgotten corner of the solar system, was the missing tool.

This fact settled, it became necessary to locate and use the missing tool.

It was a pitifully small generation. Only seven bright-eyed and high-hearted young

men. But that night they broke out of their prescribed boundaries. They went off reservation, and separated in seven directions. Each had a theory, and a hope to be explored.

Without their ident-armbands of platinum with the old Greek letter deeply incised, they resembled any other seven youths picked at random from the teeming multitudes. They could mingle unquestioned, and their studies had prepared them for various tasks to which their forged papers entitled them. But adaptation was not easy.

A single incautious moment could betray them. Even a routine brain-wave check would be sufficient to identify the fugitives, for in subtle ways, the gamma-men were different.

Seven young men with a noble purpose, and fanatical hopes in their hearts.

And now there were two. Five of them had made fatal slips, and had been hunted down to hideous deaths.

Ferris was one of the two survivors.

FOUR people stood paralyzed while the hammering resounded at the gate. This was no human fist demanding attention, but an odd, robot-like clanking, as if a mechanical beast nosed in determined rooting against the metal leaves of the gate.

It was just such a beast. A hurrying whine rose into notes of shrill frustration. Metallic and electronic frustration, for the tracker was a bloodhound of vacuum tubes and relays and switches and batteries and transformers. Unerring and inexorable, its robot senses sorted a single frequency from all other brain wave patterns, and it clung to the trail with chilling efficiency. Something about its unhuman lusting numbed most quarry before the pursuers in charge of the monster could check its demonic eagerness for prey.

Now, like a metallic carnivore scenting blood, the robot tracker nuzzled the gate and rebounded to nuzzle gain.

All four of the humans inside the compound imagined the scene outside. Pencil beams of hand radiolumes glinted here and there, the questing soldiers and police squads, the glittering serpentine body of the tracker, with its scurrying treads churning

clouds of dust as it whined and rooted at the gate.

Bat Ferris shot a glance of uneasy calculation at his three companions. The girl was an unknown quantity. Angel, momentarily shocked, was predictable enough within limits. Pao Chung was openly an opportunist, willing to turn any situation to personal profit. Unarmed, Ferris could not even deal with them, let alone with the police outside. He frowned angrily.

Teucrete's stare held on him for a moment, as if puzzled. Her eyes moved on, focusing on Angel, then Pao Chung. Presently, they came back to Ferris, amused and faintly mocking.

"What is a gamma-man doing here?" she asked.

"An interesting question," said Pao Chung ironically. "But not of prime importance at the moment."

Ferris watched a smile writhe on the girl's lips and felt a quick relief. She might help, if only to thwart Pao Chung's idea of throwing him to the human wolves outside.

A harsh voice clamored for admittance.

The animals were growing restive again. An earthy bellow boomed out against a counterpoint of birdlike trills. The sand leopards coughed guttural warnings. Somewhere a pygmy elephant trumpeted, and the giant insects burst into deafening clatters.

Teucrete motioned for silence, then drew the bolts and held the gate ajar on its short chain.

"Who's there?" she demanded roughly.

"Police," several voices explained. "Open the gate, or we'll break it down."

"Have you a warrant?"

"It's a security matter," someone explained hopefully.

"Tell that to the animals," she stormed.

"It's as much as your life's worth to come in here tonight. They're upset already, and I can't control them if you keep up this noise. Go away."

An authoritative voice blustered. "This is an important matter. Let me talk to your father."

Teucrete shrugged. "He will be back by noon tomorrow. Come then, and bring a warrant to search. Or—"

She followed the speech with some in-

sulting suggestions, not in the best of taste. The authoritative voice turned into a gargle addressing a slammed gate. Profanity did not disturb the tracker, which continued to root noisily at the metal.

Teucrete shoved bolts into sockets and stood back. She sighed, and beckoned the three men to follow her.

They moved amid a nightmarish cacophony of sounds. In memory roused by the various elements of the uproar, Bat Ferris revisited the far planets. Fortunately the light was too dim to see all the sources of sound, but Ferris mentally identified many of the caged dwellers by ear or by nose.

Wrigglers from the mercury mines of Callisto. Venusian swamp slugs, and grullcats from the Tihar Forest. Morbau-spawn from the honeycombed caverns of Triton. Wireflies and needle-flies, known by their eerie humming and buzzing. Seven-limbed bat-noses from the twilight mine of Mercury. Iceworms from Neptune and Pluto, and the deadly windharps from Mars. Amiably imbecilic moondogs from the satellites of Saturn pressed blank flat faces against the walls of their insulated glass tanks. Monsters out of nightmare. A madman's miscellany.

There was more, an incredible infinity of animal horizons. But imagination reels back, and description falters. What words can catalog the fringes of morphology!

FERRIS focussed his interest on the girl. Teucrete. A strange name, and as strange a being as these she lived among. He wondered idly about her racial background. Her father's origin was a mystery, and who could say what mate he had found on fecund Venus? Was his daughter one of those half-human mutants, or was she just what she seemed, a wilful and badly raised human girl? Ferris could only guess, and await further evidence of her intentions toward him.

But he liked the way she walked. Tall, straight, slender as a spear, and as poised. Pride was in her, and a hint of warped character in her frigid disdain of weakness or fear. Physically—but Ferris was no authority on feminine beauty. On the reservation women had been scarce, most of them neurotic virgins, or old. He had known

women since, but mostly the hard, cynical opportunists of the planetary frontier boom-towns. None to share a life with.

Vast perspectives of cages and tanks and pressure vats went off in all directions. He would not have imagined so much area covered by the establishment. It seemed limitless, and all its dimensions were oddly confusing. Intentionally so, since it was laid out in labyrinthine fashion. Unguided, a stranger could lose himself in a matter of minutes. It defied belief that a zoo of such colossal proportions could exist within the precincts of a city, even such a sprawling megalopolis as Castarona. But at last they were through the cage areas, which lined the periphery of the compound, and Teurete led the men into a building of dazzling white stone.

"My father's laboratory," she explained. "Here we synthesize foods for the animals, and try with all our ingenuity to provide an approximate environment for them."

Her voice brought Ferris back to the present. "It won't work," he said. "Security squads will never wait for a warrant. Even if they do, what good is half an hour? They'll break down your gate and swarm through here like hunting bees."

Teurete laughed scornfully. "Afraid, gamma-man?"

"If I were I wouldn't be here. But only a fool refuses to recognize danger."

"Relax," she advised. "They will break in, true. But there may be a little difficulty finding their way among the cages. It is a maze, as you saw. And the animals will give them some trouble. I am not forgetting the tracker, but the moondogs and wireflies can confuse anything that operates on electronics. All we need is a slight delaying action. We can count on that."

"There is another exit?" asked Pao Chung eagerly.

Her laugh crystallized in tinkling fragments, like showering shards of glass. "Another exit, yes. The way my father goes when he hunts. If you have the nerve to take it! But compose yourself, Pao Chung. You will need supplies of food, water, air, special clothing. And . . . there is a price."

Hesitantly, unhappily, Pao Chung inquired the price.

"The way is dangerous," she said rapidly.

"You might not come back. And I must see that my father is protected. Give me an order on your bank or lawyer for all the evidence you have against him; for whatever crimes or stupidities he may have committed."

"How do you know such an order will be honored?" Pao Chung muttered speculatively. "Once I am free—"

The girl tossed her head till the bell of ebony hair swung dangerously. "It had better be honored," she warned crisply. "For there is only one way back . . . if you ever come back. And I can control it. I don't think you will like your surroundings well enough to remain there indefinitely."

Pao Chung bowed to the inevitable. Angel chuckled moodily, and Bat Ferris faced Teurete with admiration on his pleasantly ugly features.

"Well done," he praised. "Is there a price for me?"

"No price to a man who likes animals. I sensed that in you as we passed the cages."

Impulsively, the girl leaned toward Ferris and forced her lips violently on his. "That is for luck, gamma-man. On the house, but the next one might cost you dearly. Watch yourself."

Ferris clung to the sanctuary of masculine silence. Pao Chung glowered sullenly, and Angel's amusement sent iridescent ripples glinting from his wings.

"How about me?" he demanded.

"No kiss, no price," she told him, "but a word of advice, mutant. Keep those wings out of revolving doors."

Angel grinned happily, his gargoyle face wrinkling into impossible contortions. "They are a nuisance."

Newly garbed and equipped, the men followed Teurete from the building. Stopping to stuff Pao Chung's order into a some feminine idea of a safety-vault, not too safe in the company of lecherous males, Teurete conducted her charges through a lovely formal garden that functioned by concealed hydroponics, and on into another built up area.

But this was no cubicle of stone or steel or plastic. It was a roofless structure of glass. Vertical panels of glass ran off beyond sight. Panels of all colors, all degrees of transparency. Some were as lucid as crystal, some

barely translucent, and more bent or mirrored to distort, reflect or refract light. All were tinted, some weakly, others violently stained. The place was stridently illuminated by concealed radi-floods. It was a solid mass of rainbow effects, a forest of crystal mirrors and shafts and flickering, glowing prisms.

One entered by a kind of airlock, or more accurately, a lightlock. There was no change in atmospheric pressure, but the density and beating force of sheer luminosity increased by squares and cubes as the travellers strode through linked cubes of glass.

They entered the light maze. Dazzling splendors beat upon them. Vision was overwhelmed by visible vibrations. They drowned in light.

IV

"DON'T touch anything," warned Teucrete. "Exact alignment is important."

She stopped before a keyboard like the console of a gigantic organ. Behind it rose massed ranks of vacuum tubes, all glowing, humming, flickering. The girl's fingers skipped nimbly on the keys, and notes of sound rose in tinkling, chiming sprays from the shafts. Colors stormed and raged in the crystalline forest, running up and down the visible octaves of light. One sensed other scales beyond, in both upper and lower wavelengths. Glass panels and crystal shafts vibrated to sound and light, like tuning forks. They stirred, quivered, vanished, then reappeared. A tall man appeared among the shafts and strode toward the travellers.

"Khaljean!" said Pao Chung nervously.

It was sufficient introduction. There was uncanny resemblance between father and daughter, like two matched paintings in different keys. The animal man listened quietly, while Teucrete explained the situation. He looked at Pao Chung and laughed. He shrugged.

"A bargain is a bargain," said Khaljean. "Perhaps I should go back to Venus and fabricate some gnawed bones to convince the police searching parties that the animals devoured you. All of you had better remain here and wait till I send for you."

"You are good at faked evidence," Pao Chung jibed bitterly.

"In a good cause, yes," agreed Khaljean

good-naturedly. "Even in a bad cause, this time. Stay here. You will be safer."

"Wait!" ordered Ferris.

Khaljean measured him mockingly. "Who are you to say?"

"I am a gamma-man," Ferris told him.

"That doesn't frighten me, youngster. So am I. Or was. Do you know the name Djevos Barian?"

Ferris blinked. "But Barian was hunted down and killed, his remains positively identified."

Khaljean smiled. "As Pao Chung said, I am good at faked evidence. I always had a skill with synthetics. A man thing I created lived long enough to be slaughtered in my place, and I had constructed him well, even to duplicating my fingerprints and brain patterns. Officially I am dead. But ten years ago Pao Chung found out about me. He has bled me systematically ever since. Until now."

"Shall I kill him for you?" asked Angel, with malicious joy in the thought. "Now that you have access to his evidence, his life can be only a menace to you."

Khaljean frowned. "I don't believe in killing. But sometimes Pao Chung has tempted me. No, let him live."

"So you are Barian?" said Ferris admiringly.

"Was Barian. I have become Khaljean. The real one was a small-time operator, dealing chiefly in dead animals. I was with him when he died. We were much alike in appearance. With plastic surgery, I became Khaljean. And I have made the name famous. You must be one of the seven recent escapees from the reservation. We will have much to talk about later."

"Not later," insisted Ferris. "Now. Where does this maze lead?"

Khaljean humored him. "Nowhere or anywhere. It's a dimensional short cut that can take you to any place in the solar universe, or even a few odd places in adjacent or parallel spacetime continuums. Is there somewhere you want to go?"

Ferris nodded soberly. "A place I must go. Now, if possible."

"Why?" Khaljean studied the younger man grimly.

"I'm not sure you could understand, since you left the gamma reservation so long ago.

"I'll try to explain. Somewhere, there is a tool. Not that exactly, nor a machine either, but we call it that for lack of a term. In the old books of our library, there was mention of it. A description, with a hint of properties. It is something alien, a control placed on the destinies of group-man."

His voice droned on, speaking as if the subject were a lesson he had learned by rote. "Many times, man's social and political organization has painfully climbed the ladder toward a workable, civilized system, but always it has slipped and fallen back. The individual mind functions well, for the most part, but not so the group-mind. Any crowd is less honest, less efficient, and far less intelligent than its individual units. The larger the crowd, the greater the tangent, the possibilities for evil and injustice. In attempts to solve the problems of group relationships, man is worse than pitiful.

"Long study has convinced the gamma-people that this is not a mere accident. Outside influence warps men's thinking in groups, warps social and political organization. It seems as if group-man struggled hopefully to put together a complex jigsaw puzzle, in which many parts will fit badly into an infinity of possible relationships. The true fit is difficult to find, but even the law of averages should help in so many attempts. Time and time again, just as the puzzle is nearly completed, someone joggles the puzzler's elbow, and the pattern is destroyed.

"There is such a juggler, such an outside influence. Its existence was proved, its influence even measured. There are clues scattered through the old books. We know what it is, what it looks like, how it operates, but we have been powerless to counteract its influence. The warping hypnotic broadcasts keep throwing mankind back to chaos, when utopia is in sight. It is too strong to combat, and the source must be destroyed. By our solemn pact, my six friends and I bound ourselves to locate and smash this alien mechanism."

KHALJEAN licked his lips reflectively. "You interest me," he admitted. "I was once young enough to be idealistic myself. What is this alien monster you describe?"

"Not a monster in the ordinary sense.

Not a tool, nor quite even a machine. Living jewels, perhaps. At least radioactive false gems.

"Gas, probably radon, solidified under the incredible pressures in the heart of Jupiter. Solar Surveys knows about them, for they were seen once, and even handled by men. There is an article about them in the *Encyclopaedia of the Solar Planets*. In 2036, they were discovered, mined by cybernetic machinery. Then on their way to Mars, the ship carrying the jewels was sabotaged and wrecked. Wreckage and frozen bodies were discovered on the rogue asteroid Hidalgo, but the jewels were missing."

Pao Chung had shown growing interest in the conversation. He broke in to ask, "Stolen?"

"Stolen, perhaps. Possibly they disintegrated at the time of the wreck, or they may have transmuted into something unrecognized by the searchers. They may have become tenuous enough to sink through the surface of Hidalgo and recrystallized inside. But the evil influence continues. We believe that they are still there, still in existence, working their hidden evil, warping the brains of men, producing social and political chaos. Five of my friends have lost their lives searching for this menace. Possibly the sixth is dead, too, since he vanished into the unknown and has not been heard from.

"I tried, myself. Angel and I landed on Hidalgo and searched carefully. But Hidalgo is 'off limits' for spacemen. Solar Surveys sent the Space Patrol after us, and we fled before finishing our search. We were chased to Mars, traced and hunted to Venus. We crashed there, and while I tried to get money for new equipment, Angel got involved with Pao Chung. You know the rest. Now you see why I must go to Hidalgo."

Khaljean shook his head in sorrow. "I understand. But you could never find your way through the maze."

Ferris accused him with fanatical eyes. "You could help me to find my way."

"Not I. I am too old, and I am not sure that I approve of your meddling. Not that I would try to stop you, but don't count on help from me. How do you know that this alien machine is what you say? Its purpose may be good, not evil. Some higher intelligence may have placed it in our system as a

He Went Out to Meet Them

WITH FLARES AND WHISTLES and blaring bugles, the Reds had been attacking fanatically all night. Wave after wave they came, in overwhelming numbers.

By dawn, Jerry Crump could see that his position alone was keeping them from overrunning L Company. Twice he went out to meet them with his bayonet. Once he retook a captured machine gun. And four times he left shelter to bring in wounded comrades.

Now, an enemy soldier crept close unobserved. He lobbed a grenade. It landed squarely among the wounded men. Without a second's hesitation, Corporal Crump threw himself upon it, smothered the explosion with his own body, and saved his four companions' lives.

"I got hurt," says Jerry Crump, "but I got back alive. Because our armed forces have the finest medical equipment in the world—even at the front. And you helped put it there by investing in U. S. Defense Bonds."

Bonds are savings. But they mean production power, too. Helping provide the arms and equipment and care of every kind that give a fighting man more than a fighting chance!

Corporal Jerry Crump U.S. Army Medal of Honor



Now E Bonds pay 3%! Now, improved Series E Bonds start paying interest after 6 months. And average 3% interest, compounded semiannually when held to maturity! Also, all maturing E Bonds automatically go on earning—at the new rate—for 10 more years. Today, start investing in U. S. Series E Defense Bonds through the Payroll Savings Plan at work.

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governor to influence mankind, to shield man from his own follies. It may be a warning road sign to keep us from crashing into a dead end. Our utopias sound very dull to me, they may easily be a dead end for mankind. I like the interesting and amusing variations of chaos, so let me cling to them. Follow your destiny, if you will. I won't stop you."

Ferris looked pitifully young, but he stood his ground with absurd pride and courage.

"Right or wrong, I must try," he said evenly. "And I won't grant the right of alien interference. Man, too, has a right to work out his destiny, good or bad."

Angel spoke up eagerly for his partner. "I won't say I know what you're talking about, and maybe I'm too stupid and ignorant to understand. But as a victim of 'chaos' I don't appreciate it."

Pao Chung sneered. "One vote for law and order from the fallen Angel, if it can be believed. Like Khaljean, my preference is for chaos, as it furnishes more opportunities for a man of my interests. However, my soul revolts at this talk of destroying gems of presumably unique properties. They must have value. Perhaps you can dismantle this machine, without harming its parts. As a business man, with time on my hands, I would like to go with you and see if something can be arranged."

"I don't trust you," Ferris said frankly. "And I don't believe that the jewels can be salvaged. Come along if you want. I can't stop you. But don't try any tricks."

Pao Chung accepted the warning with bland indifference.

"Father!" called Teucrete. "Leave me your protective suiting."

Khaljean smiled with sad irony. "Are you making a choice?"

"Yes. I'm going with them. I know the way. I can control the maze and guide them safely back. I don't know if I believe in this fabulous machine, or jewels, or whatever. But I think I might learn to believe in . . . in him. It's something I'll have to find out."

Smiling, Khaljean stripped off his protective armor and yielded it to the girl. As an afterthought, he handed her his blaster.

"The choice is yours to make. But in such company, the blaster may come in handy."

Khaljean shook hands with Ferris and

Angel, though he avoided looking at Pao Chung.

To Ferris, he said, "Come back if you can. And look after my girl. In the meantime, I'll throw some gnawed bones to the police wolves, and we'll manufacture a new identity for you."

Without a farewell, Khaljean strode into the crystalline forest. His lonely figure paused to wave.

"Good hunting, father," Teucrete called after him.

She tripped keys at the console. Light quivered in painful vibrations. His figure became transparent, then dissolved. . . .

Absent-mindedly, Teucrete climbed into the suit of protective armor. Ferris helped her zip up the clumsy garments, then clasped her arm impulsively.

"I haven't the skill to say it properly—but thanks."

"I'll expect your skill to improve with experience," she said irritably, fixing the blaster gun securely in its spring clip.

Returning to the console, Teucrete worked out an elaborate composition on the keys. Tubes flared and flickered, flamed and faded. There was the humming and the bell-toned clamor like glass raindrops spattering on a ceramic floor.

"We have arrived," she whispered. It was then Pao Chung acted.

QUICK as a striking snake, he moved close beside the girl and snatched the blaster from its clip.

Backing away, he waved the weapon in wide sweeps to menace both Ferris and Angel at once.

Teucrete turned and cried out. Angel froze like a statue. Ferris started a rush, then thought better of it.

"New deal, I think," said Pao Chung brutally. "From here on I'll give the orders."

Angel chuckled ferociously. "You can't get both of us, Pao Chung. If we rush at once, you can kill one, but the other will get to you."

"Don't try it," warned Pao Chung, sweating but deadly.

"You keep talking of deals," continued Angel evenly. "Better make one with me. For the girl, and a third of the loot, I'll talk business with you."

"I want her myself," croaked Pao Chung.
"Neither of you will get me alive," said Teucrete.

Ferris moved a little, and the gun held steadily on him. He hesitated, glancing curiously at Angel. Light glinted from quivering wings. The gargoyle face grinned hideously. Heavy eyelids blinked in remembered signal.

"Now," snapped Ferris.

Ferris and Angel leaped, like two moving parts of the same machine. Angel was quicker. His powerful wings wafted him in a long, swift bound.

The blaster swerved, flamed, burst in deafening explosion. A reek of charred, disintegrating flesh and singed feathers filled the air.

Angel shrieked in torment as his legs vanished in crumbling ashes. Wings flailing, his body a maimed and blasted horror, he crashed down upon Pao Chung. The gun jerked from nerveless fingers and clattered on the floor. Its beam cut a tinkling swathe among the crystal shafts. Real droplets of half-molten crystal struck myriad bell-tones in falling.

Writhing and threshing in agony, Angel clung to his desperate purpose. Powerful clawlike hands circled Pao Chung's head and wrenched it off. The head rolled free like a ball as two snarled bodies sagged together in bloody horror.

Stricken, Ferris bent over his friend, trying hopelessly to help. The gargoyle lips parted. Dry husks of sound whistled from them.

"Go on. Smash the machine! But first, do

this job right—for me."

Trembling, Ferris recovered the blaster gun, cut down its intensity, then thrust the blunt muzzle deep into the striped fur, where rich crimson now mingled with the other gaudy dyes. Blinking his eyes shut, he pressed the stud. Angel writhed and was gone.

Ferris did not look back. Hand in hand with Teucrete he walked slowly toward the forest of crystal shafts. There was much damage, and his heart quailed from the task ahead.

"Can you still find the way?" he asked numbly.

"I'm not sure," the girl faltered. "I'm not sure we can ever get back. Exact alignment is so terribly important."

"We can try," said Ferris grimly.

Hand in hand, young men and women, with the dream still fresh within them, will always seek the ultimate answer to the ultimate questions. It may be, of course, that there is no ultimate answer, and that even the quest is a delusion. But Teucrete and Ferris, with the flame of a new love burning fiercely between them, believed that it was important to find and destroy some alien thing that warped men's minds. Others may think only of building a life together, as a pledge to the future, but not Teucrete and Ferris. Time for that later, they hoped.

For the moment, they might, just possibly, make mankind's tomorrows a little brighter, or more hopeful.

Hand in hand they walked together to the crystal maze, and entered. Perhaps they found something. . . .

THE VIZIGRAPH

(Continued from page 3)

It meant leaving a wild new world that was just a-borning as far as humanity was concerned; it meant leaving Gatcha Bergenson.

Just threw away my Shakespeare—now have RICARDO. Probably should throw away my Hakluyt and Mandeville also. Here's a few other Ricardisms that, putting it mildly, stank:

(1) The Black River, which *speeds up* on reaching its swampy destination.

May be common on Venus, but most meandering Terran rivers are slow, sluggish, and old, in swamps. See p. 85-91 in Longwell-Knopf-Flint's *OUTLINES OF GEOLOGY*, Mr. Tenn.

(2) Black River indicated as muddy and opaque, yet Graff Dingle (excellent name for a hero, incidentally, if you've heard the one about the Swedish bells) can see schools of "sardines" swimming in it 50 feet away (p. 48 of story).

(3) Max Pubina's hideout is said to have cost a fortune to build. I agree, if the rear windows were big enough to admit a pterodactyl! Some pterodactyls had 24-foot wingspans, you know.

(4) Pubina's living room must have been expansive also, with a cased pterodactyl in one corner and "Macduff" wrestling Pubina there, plus tied-up heroine, father, etc. Must have resembled the Armory in D. C. in rough dimensions.

(5) All Dingle's family, brothers, etc. are said to have succumbed to the Virus, but he, in the impossible trite denouncement, is a "native of Venus" and has therefore developed a natural immunity! One more *deus ex machina* to add to the entire chain of such *deuses* that made up the story!

(6) See last line of story: How do you close a "lidless eye"?

Not that I particularly care, but the whole business of intelligent pterodactyls was run into the ground by Burroughs in his *PELLUCIDAR* and *AT THE EARTH'S CORE*. And I've never read a story yet about the "charging dinosaur" when it wasn't stressed that the beast would keep right on going for twenty or thirty minutes after his head was blasted off. An interesting fact, but first pointed out in the late 20's, I believe, as far as STF goes.

Oh, well. Rest of the March issue was superb as usual.

PATRICK

ANTI-CLIMAX

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Arcadia, California

Dear Editor:

Something new has been added in the recent issues of *PLANET*, namely decent stories. The space-burns still lurk in the shorts, and space-hummed heroes still flex bronzed biceps in the novelettes, but even they manage to do something besides wearing native spears between their ribs. In the January issue only two stories could definitely be called space operas, these being *WAR DRUMS OF MERCURY LOST* and *SUN DEATH* though the rest all had a smattering of it. Of course it wouldn't be *PLANET* without a little space-warpage.

However, let's have a little more of writers like Berry, Dee, Loomis and Dye, and less of Anderson, James, Williams, and Gallun. I imagine that the only reason you accept their offerings is to furnish each issue with a name author. All they ever send you is

the residue of their talents saving the better stuff for *Galaxy*, et al.

I find no sympathy in my heart for an author who doesn't do his best at all times, no matter the market. I would be ashamed to have my name connected with some of their stories you have printed. Among these authors only Gallun's *RETURN OF A LEGEND* stands out in the midst of the material you have printed. Meanwhile writers like Dee, who are not fortunate enough to have a name, have to sell stories on merit alone which is as it should be. One thing impedes Dee and others like him. That is the hack, pseudo-space setting that they substitute for style. Anderson can afford to ride on his laurels for a while. Dee, etc. cannot.

Berry, your find, however, is an entirely different matter. It is almost impossible to believe that this is his first attempt at writing. His style is somewhat similar to that of Ray Bradbury with only a little less polish. I might be tempted to say that it is an outright "take." It could be a Bradbury pen name though I doubt if you would hallyhoo him so much if it was.

Even with all of Berry's skill the best story in the magazine was Roger Dee's *OH MESMERIST FROM MIMA*. It was a rewrite of Mullen's *MASTER OF THE MOONDOG* but was so far superior that comparison would be ridiculous. Mullen is an excellent plotter but his writing is so inept that I always have trouble starting anything with his by-line.

Next come the three Berry pieces with *THE IMAGINATIVE MAN* and *FINAL VENUSIAN* neck-and-neck for second, followed by *GROUNDLING*. I imagine that *FINAL VENUSIAN* will be the most popular of the three. *THE IMAGINATIVE MAN* read like *THE WIZARD OF OZ* but I liked it. *THE GROUNDLING*'s ending was a little too easily guessed but it was easily better than the rest of the stories.

The novella was a little too long for its theme which I didn't like in the first place. The Solarian Combine idea is being worn to a frazzle by all the name writers who must feel that they have a mission to accomplish.

Then comes *SUN-DEATH* which had the advantage of fair characterization and the disadvantage of an insipid story line.

Followed closely by *WAR DRUMS OF MERCURY LOST* which was one-hundred per cent hack. Writers of this style must use a mimeograph instead of a typewriter.

As for *THE MAN WHO STAKED THE STARS*, I thought it was a good story but it was no classic.

As for Mavis Hartman I find her information a little hard to believe. Would you mind naming your sources, Mavis?

Thine,

JERRY MEGAHAN

6 OF 1

Dear Editor,

Sweet Springs, Missouri

Since I haven't as yet read the March issue of *PS* I can hardly comment on the superiority or inferiority of the fictional material contained therein but would like to get in a belated comment on your invocation of printing three stories by Bryan Berry in one issue. First to John Obregon. John seems to be under the impression that *THREE* stories by an author in a single issue is the world's record. . . sorry to disappoint you John but there have been many cases in science-fiction's history when 4 and even more yarns by ONE author have graced a specific issue of a STF mag.

Most notable example of this is a certain mag which terms itself the "aristocrat" of SF. For instance,

one issue in 1943 contained 8 stories of which no less than 6 were by David Wright O'Brien. One was published under his own name the rest under pseudonyms. Other authors such as Leroy Yerax frequently wrote ENTIRE issues by themselves.

If the author is good enough two (or more . . .) stories in a respective issue do no great harm but in general I would recommend that all sf editors steer clear of such tactics. However if you ever are overcome by the urge to print 5 or 6 Bracket-tales, Jack, I for one will not object in the slightest.

I agree in part with Miss (Mrs. ????) Mercedes that Berry does show indications of imitating Bradbury. I thought his efforts satisfactory if unspectacular.

Methtinks someone slipped up in labeling the ill for RICARDO'S VIRUS . . . If that isn't a VESTAL I'll swear off PS for life. Why, pray tell, is it credited to BEESON? Just in case you aren't aware of it this VESTAL is quite an artist . . . may I make a suggestion? Why not another full page pic illustrating the lead novel of each issue by Vestal? Remember the one he did for WITCH OF THE DEMON SEAS sometime ago? PLANET just wouldn't be the same without H. B. Foes is also an exceptional artist, vaguely reminiscent of Finlay.

In departing I'd like to know if Gardner P. Fox will be present in future issues? Also—give originals to No. 1 Bill Tuning, very thoughtful letter. No. 2 Alice Bullock, for seeing the error of her ways and returning to a regular reading of P.S. No. 3 Dave Hammond . . . because . . . well to be frank simply because he's mah friend.

Respectfully,

PAUL MITTELBUSCHER

Ed's note: Right the first time, Paul. Beeson is Vestal . . . believe it's his middle monicker.

Fox should be comin' along with another soon.

CAKE-EATER

1245 Ringgold Avenue
Indianapolis, Indiana

Dear Ed:

This is the first fan letter I have ever written and it may easily be the last since it requires an unusual situation to get me to unlimber my Hermes.

I will make it brief.

Did any of you people who wrote in about the Jan. ish ever take one bite of candy and then one of lemon. It seems to me that this is what happened to Berry. As a matter of fact, I doubt very much that there are more than half a dozen writers in STP whose stories WOULD look good when put after a story such as Russell's. It has long been my opinion that cake should be the desert and not the main course or appetizer. So why not put the best stories at the end of the mag instead of the front.

No comments on the March ish except to say that it is back in the old rut with at least one exception, that is, the appetizer (KCN), was in front as it should not have been. Its proper place would be pp. 115 for the March ish.

I should sue you for \$39 for a bottle of Alka-Seltzer.

ROBERT WILLIAMS

P. S. In all fairness I must say that there were at least two readable stories in the March ish.

Ed's note: There's more than a little merit in what Robert says. PLANET did make a habit at one time of closing the mag with the choicest morsel. Lush living must have ruined us . . . we'll try henceforth to get that desert course in its proper niche.

PEACE COVERETH ALL

6438 E. 4th PL
Tulsa, Okla.

Dear Ed,

Just finished the March ish of good old PS. Read the Vizi first naturally. Say, I've been reading PS for about 2 1/2 years now, hasn't ye olde Vizi tamed down a little bit. It just doesn't seem to have the sparkle it used to. I get so sick of people writing in and griping about dear old PS. Hell, if they don't like space opera they shouldn't read it.

Anyway why not give an illo to Paul Mittelbuscher, Bill Tuning, Mrs. Shirley Cotter to sorta welcome her into fandom.

The cover! Oh, no!

A novel of The Once Gods-quote-THE WARLOCK OF SHARRADOR was pure hack. Now I like space opera but this, only thing to be thankful for is that you didn't publish three of these.

There I was awhile back griping about people who gripe at PLANET. Then I do it. This way out. The novelets were both pretty fair.

All the shorts in this ish were fair, nothing sensational tho. Note: Must we always have half the letter column taken up with people bitching about sexy covers. I feel about sex about the same way I feel about taxes, a darn good thing sometimes. However I've come to put up with sex on mag covers, same as taxes. So let's all declare peace and forget about it.

VAL WALKER

THE GOOD OLD RAIN

1415 S. Mainis
Dallas, Texas

Dear Editor:

For the first time in the last three issues I was able to read the novel in the March issue. Wasn't bad. The novelets weren't bad. WHAT INHABITS ME? was the best, but the end and the whole plot was apparent on the first page (which is very good detecting on my part since I refer to the illustration).

Now for the short stories—these are the reasons why I buy PLANET (along with the letter column, of course). I especially enjoyed CHICKEN FARM. Harvey was really a character. I didn't particularly enjoy AMOUR AMOUR DEAR PLANET but I did think it was superior to the lead novel.

HAPPY RAIN NIGHT was one of the best short stories you have published in a long, long time.

Sincerely,

BENNY SODEK

PLANES & CURVES

6 Gates Place
Binghamton, N. Y.

Dear Sir:

This shall be a letter of firsts. It is my first fan letter about my first venture into science-fiction. It is also the first time I have ever really thought about stars, planets or space travel. I've heard about it and never doubted it, but neither did I think about it (IT meaning the stars, planets and space travel mentioned above).

I am a firm believer in the fact that anything is possible.

Your PLANET is good. I enjoyed my first issue. It inspired me to buy more science-fiction. I have bought and read six magazines since I first read your PLANET a few days ago. I enjoyed most of the stories but I must admit (which is why I chose to write to you) that I liked PLANET best.

I'm afraid that my recent initiation into your field has left me in the dark as far as your Vixen graphic section is concerned. I found it interesting but confusing. For instance, what in bloody blazes gives with the BEM, FEN & GHU business. Also this stuff about illos, pics, etc.?

I have but one real complaint to make about both your readers and those of other magazines. Who writes the letters? A large number of letters from both the male and female population seem to be about the cover ladies being dressed in a minimum of clothing and subsequent subject of sex. I should like to make a comment, or rather a group of comments, which will make me hated far and wide.

The only ugly thing about sex is the mind of the person who makes it ugly. As for the body, male and female, it is both lovely and graceful if it is kept as God meant it to be. Even after God made Adam and Eve to cover themselves, it was only with a fig leaf. He did not demand that they cover the loveliness of the planes and curves of the body. It is only that which is the shame of the human mind that did that.

Men are motivated in their demands for a covered cover girl by an innate jealousy that says to them that no man must look upon his woman.

Women, I suspect, are moved by that same lack of self-confidence you find in the average woman when she refuses to admit that the beautiful girl down the street is beautiful.

Enough—I have probably written more than is needed to bring down the wrath of the science-fiction populace upon my head.

Yours truly,

MRS. ALFREDA RUNYON

Ed's note: Welcome to the fold, Alfreda, and do not be afraid. BEM is merely the contraction of bug-eyed-monster; FEN is one letter shorter than fun. You'll find a wealth of new and unusual words in sci-fiction and more than a few are quite apt. Illos and pics are the delightful children of illustrations and pictures. The artists' original renditions are offered to the three top-rated letter-writers each issue.

GHU TOO

Box 1296
Arvinas Pass, Texas

Dear Ed:

I cut my science-fiction teeth on PLANET but lately I've been neglecting the old gal, but when I saw the March ish on the newsstand I shelled out my two bits, mostly for old times' sake.

You chum, are about the unsmilest editor P5 has had since I've been reading it. I do not know whether it is us fan who drive 'em nuts, or the circulation, or what. Anyhow, congratulations, and GHU be with you.

I was happy with most of the stories in the March issue but it seemed to me that Fox has been listening to the song that goes "those far away places with the strange sounding names." Does he really think up those names, or just take a flyer at the type keys and takes what comes? At any rate, the yarn was good old fashioned blood and thunder and I happen to like it. So there.

The rest of the stories were good, and I thought both novelets were tops. HAPPY RAÏN NIGHT was sort of like last week's champagne—flat. AMOUR was good, and the illo for it exceptional. The cover was awful.

Fanatically,
MARILYN SHREWSBURY

STRICTLY FICTION

Box 301

Lake Preston, S. D.

Dear Editor:

For some eighteen years or more I and my husband have been reading several science-fiction magazines. PLANET is one of these. Lately we have been reading the letter department. I have something to say.

We are not exactly what you could call fans . . . readers comes closer to it. You see we consider the stories we read as fiction, not as "tomorrow's fact" as one of my calls it.

Some of it could be true, but the ideas expressed in sf stories are so varied that all of them could not possibly be true. We are at a loss to know which, if any, are true. Really now, isn't it supposed to be fiction . . . or are the writers and editors as well as the readers clairvoyants and prophets? I thought they didn't believe in such stuff. I dare say this because to the best of my knowledge PLANET STORIES magazine has never made such claims that would make it ridiculous in the eyes of your "readers" who greatly outnumber all sf fans combined.

One other thing I dislike intensely is the attitude taken by some writers, editors and fans that is eager to have science-fiction interesting, ridicule must be heaped on the idea that God is creator of not only our own small world but the entire cosmos as well. Are these offenders really so naive as to believe, after looking toward the vastness of the stars and the gigantic void above, that it all is a matter of mere happenstance?

Sci-fiction stories can be written in an interesting manner without ridiculing the Creator and His name, and acting as though immovability was something not to be shunned. Good literature lists through the ages, and more often than not, is of high ideals and morals.

PLANET carries fewer stories of the type we dislike than some other magazines. Congrats on that score, and keep up the good work.

Sincerely,

MRS. BERTHA SUNGOT

ANDY BOUNCES BACK

5 Clark Street
Newburgh, New York

Dear Editor:

Why in the name of Aldebaran is everyone griping about artist Anderson? If these grippers will only examine the covers of other sf pulpazines, they will soon realize that Anderson is the best cover artist in the field.

Look at Anderson's background in the May issue. Bonestall couldn't have done better. Anderson makes even the most infinitesimal objects, such as the rivets on the space helmets, stand out. I firmly believe that there are other PLANET fans who appreciate good art work and who appreciate Anderson.

Who is this Kelly Freas? He isn't illustrating science-fiction at all. Kindly tell this fellow to wipe off his paint brush and leave. Have Anderson illustrate the lead novel as well as the cover.

May I also add that I believe that B. Curtis (who spun quite a good yarn) is really Bryan Berry, using a pen name.

Loyal Fan,

BOB BERRIOS

Ed's note: Well, Bryan Berry has now run the full gamut . . . for B. Curtis happens to be Betty Curtis, a full-fledged female from Pennsylvania.